Cultivating immortality

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Cultivating immortality

by KizuKatana

Summary

“A weapon is not the same as a spouse, even if that weapon is powerful.” The words had barely left Wei Wuxian’s lips when he found himself slammed against the trunk of the nearest tree, Lan Wangji’s hands gripping painfully tight around his shoulders, practically lifting him from the ground.

“Wei Ying is not a weapon!” Lan Wangji bit out.

Wei Wuxian had said many things that had angered the illustrious Second Jade in the past. When he had been in Cloud Recesses as a youth, it had been Wei Wuxian’s favorite hobby. But he realized had never managed to truly enrage Lan Wangji with anything he had said until this moment.

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The Lan sect has been putting pressure on Lan Wangji to find a cultivation partner. They don't like the one he chooses.

- Translation into Português brasileiro available: Cultivando a Imortalidade by SraLanofc

Chapter 1: Seeking Knowledge

Author's note: This is my first ever fic in this fandom (please be gentle). I am totally, completely, irrevocably obsessed with these characters. I've read the (translated) book, watched the drama series, and started binge-reading fics because I can't stop thinking about these two.

Canon divergent after Wei Wuxian gets kicked out of Cloud Recess lecture. I like the novel's way of describing Lan Zhan's personality/person (esp the eyes and hands) and also Wei Wuxian's cultivation method. Novel canon also in terms of no yin iron pre wwx.

Wei Wuxian's mind was a chaotic swirl of different idea fragments scattering and coalescing. His teachers had always been annoyed by his inability to sit still or ask predictable questions, but with a mind as active and curious as his, stillness and silence were basically impossible. This was especially true when he was working on a complicated question, like the one he was currently wrestling with. Times like these made it impossible for him to shut his brain off, even to sleep, without the help of copious amounts of alcohol. But he didn't have time for drinking today. He let his mind flood with the information he'd read, flickers of possibilities and contingencies, new questions that were generated each time he found an answer to an earlier piece of the puzzle.

It was a pretty common state of being for Wei Wuxian's active (some would say *over*- active) mind.

His tan, tapered fingers drummed softly on the library table as he looked over the pile of books and scrolls he'd selected to delve into on his latest visit to the prestigious library at Cloud Recesses. Unlike other libraries that he visited, there was not a speck of dust on any of the volumes to smudge his back and red robes. The library was pristine, as was the library's other occupant, whom Wei Wuxian was (for once) trying to not let himself be distracted by.

Lan Wangj, the esteemed Second Jade of the GusuLan sect, sat at a table across the room from him. As always, the Lan cultivator was absolutely still and focused in his reading, his posture perfectly erect. His white robes were so clean they practically glowed with otherworldly purity, just as their owner did.

Wei Wuxian really wished he had some porn to slip into the man's book to see if his reaction would top the last time he'd tried it. Alas, it had been too long since his last visit to the Nie clan and his satchel was empty of such materials. He would have to remedy that soon, but for now he needed to focus. He suppressed the urge to needle Lan Wangj. Wei Wuxian couldn't quite say why he always felt the need to try to get under the stoic man's skin, but he just… found it very difficult to be in the same room as Lan Wangji and not get in his space and make him just *look* at Wei Wuxian. He'd managed to get his attention a few times (occasionally finding himself at the point of the other man's sword, and that had only made it *more* fun), but somehow it was never quite enough.

Wei Wuxian blew out a short breath, trying to get his ever-zig-zagging mind to the task at hand. The problem he was researching wasn't one of idle curiosity. (Dangerous, deviant thinking, Madam Yu had called Wei Wuxian's curiosity in the past. Evidently it was more honorable to memorize spells and incantations others had invented rather than coming up with your own.)

He wasn't sure whether the strange signs in the ravine that two villagers of a small settlement Wei Wuxian had passed through a few times were dangerous or not. Wen Ning and A-Yuan had found a small, toxic swamp that had seemed to have appeared basically overnight on their search for a particular medicinal herb that grew in the area. They'd never heard of such a thing near their village before. Wei Wuxian had gone to look at it, and found something about it… unsettling. He was used to following his instincts about such things. He had only visited the village a few times, but he had grown attached to the people there, and the simple life they lived. Especially the little boy, A-Yuan. If the swamp grew, it could contaminate the village water supply.

He frowned in concentration, pushing some of the tendrils of his long, black hair back behind his ears as they had fallen free from the loose half-bun he wore it in. He quickly read through another scroll he had been allowed to borrow, his agile mind weaving together pieces of information from various sources, and various angles. Wei Wuxian might not have the discipline that his silent library companion did, but he balanced it by his ability to innovate where others could only follow precedent.

Still, being able to research others' thoughts was a huge shortcut to figuring new things out. The library at Cloud Recesses was nothing if not impressive in terms of codifying existing thoughts, rules, events and procedures. Even just the tiny fraction of the books he was allowed access to were still better than anything he'd seen in the other sects. It was no wonder other clans sent their disciples here to study, despite the stifling system of endless rules imposed on anyone who entered.

Wei Wuxian's status as a rogue cultivator meant that he didn't have access to any of the deeper archives of any of the sects, but his work in ridding clan territories of difficult demons or monsters sometimes gave him access to at least a section of the knowledge each clan had codified. Things they didn't deem as dangerous or part of the elite clan knowledge.

Of course, Wei Wuxian could find a way to make just about *anything* dangerous if he really put his mind to it, but that was neither here nor there. It wasn't that he sought out trouble, or rule breaking. He just… liked to tinker. He had - at best - a very loose association with any sort of rules in just about any matter. He was endlessly curious and unless he understood exactly *why* a rule existed (and sometimes even then) he didn't see any reason for arbitrary rules to curtail his curiosity. His teachers, however, seldom agreed.

That had never been more true than with Lan Qiren, who had kicked him out in the middle of the older man's lecture for just posing a fucking *question*. Madam Yu had seized on this to finally get him thrown out of the Jiang sect for tarnishing their reputation. Everyone knew it was because she believed that Wei Wuxian was actually the bastard son of her husband (he wasn't, but there was no convincing Madam Yu when she had made up her mind).

Luckily for him, Lan Xichen was much more reasonable than either his uncle, Lan Qiren, or Madam Yu. It was the esteemed First Jade of GusuLan, its current sect leader, who had granted Wei Wuxian access to a portion of their library after Wei Wuxian had inadvertently helped Lan

Xichen's younger brother, none other than Lan Wangj, on an unexpectedly dangerous night hunt. Wei Wuxian had followed a rumor that cultivators had been going missing in a mysterious cave, and run into Lan Wangj, who was there on the same mission. Wei Wuxian had hoped after strategizing a way to beat the slaughter turtle and battling it together that Lan Wangji would have… well, not wanted to be Wei Wuxian's *friend* , because Lan Wangji had made it more than clear that would never happen. As far as Wei Wuxian knew, Lan Wangji didn't see any need for friends in general, but even if he did, the pristine Lan cultivator likely (correctly) would have realized there was need to associate with a clanless cultivator like Wei Wuxian, who stirred up trouble without even trying.

So Wei Wuxian did not aspire to be *friends* with Lan Wangj, exactly, but maybe at least… friendly acquaintances? After all, Lan Wangji would have been a turtle snack if Wei Wuxian hadn't happened upon the cave where Lan Wangji was searching for a group of missing cultivators. Of course, neither of them had expected to encounter a legendary demon turtle, and Wei Wuxian would have been a turtle snack, too, if *Lan Wangji* hadn't been there, but that was not the point. Wei Wuxian already *wanted* to be friends with Lan Wangji, so he was not the problem here. Wei Wuxian had even shared his healing supplies with the man!

But Lan Wangji had left before Wei Wuxian had even woken up the day after they escaped. Upon his next visit to Cloud Recesses, Wei Wuxian found that Lan Wangji had gone back to ignoring him save for minor flashes of annoyance directed his way. If anything, it only seemed like the man was watching him with even more disapproval, staying in the library whenever Wei Wuxian came to use it, as though Wei Wuxian could not be trusted on his own to stick to only the volumes he was allowed to access. The bond Wei Wuxian thought they had forged had either been entirely in his own mind or very temporary.

Whatever. At least the event had given Wei Wuxian access to the Cloud Recesses library.

Wei Wuxian glanced up from the book he was reading and looked over at the subject of his wandering thoughts. As always, Lan Wangji was sitting perfectly still, back perfectly straight, robes perfectly white, just… everything always fucking *perfect.* Even his stupid, expressionless face was perfect as he read whatever it was he was reading at the other library table. Wei WuXain briefly considered sending a paper man over to annoy the other cultivator, but was drawn back to his task by the unsettling sense of urgency that had been filling him since he saw the strange swamp that had appeared outside the tiny village on the edge of Wen lands.

After three hours of reading through texts and finding nothing, Wei Wuxian decided he deserved a little break. Conveniently, Lan Wangji was still sitting in exactly the same position he had been before, only now he had a brush and ink pot out and appeared to be taking notes.

What better way to entertain himself than trying to get Lan Wangji to look at him. Maybe even talk to him? As frustrating as Wei Wuxian found Lan Wangji's demeanor, he still admired the man's skill as a cultivator and a scholar. He was just so… orderly. And *calm.* The complete opposite of Wei Wuxian. It only made the itch to irritate him even stronger. And who was Wei Wuxian to resist such temptation?

"Lan Zhan!" Wei Wuxian's voice sounded loud in the silence of the library, despite the fact that he was speaking normally (" *Shouting is forbidden in the Cloud Recesses, Wei Ying").* He could

see the way Lan Wangj's body tensed with the use of his familiar name. Wei Wuxian grinned at the reaction.

"Hey, Lan Zhan. Lan Zhan!" Finally, Lan Wangji looked up and sent him a glare that would have felled a lesser man. Wei Wuxian's grin only widened, and he waved at him. "Lan Zhan! What are you reading?"

As usual, the elegant cultivator did not deign to reply.

"Lan Zhan, you are so mean to me!" Wei Wuxian laughed. "I've been working so hard and you won't even provide me decent company as a reward."

Lan Wangji's expression remained perfectly flat as he glared at Wei Wuxian for several long seconds before turning his attention back to his book. Wei Wuxian sighed.

It frustrated Wei Wuxian (it didn't hurt. It didn't), because he actually would be interested to hear Lan Wangj's thoughts on how to diffuse lightning spells, but the other man was already annoyed with him and would likely not respond. Which made sense. Why would someone like Lan Wangji waste time on someone like Wei Wuxian? He wouldn't.

Wei Wuxian opened a scroll that he looked like it might have some of the information he needed. From his peripheral vision, he noticed Lan Wangji had stilled (though, given how rigid the man always sat it would be difficult for Wei Wuxian to explain how there was a difference, but there definitely was). Wei Wuxian began reading the scroll, but soon felt eyes upon him. He looked up and met Lan Wangji's gaze, arching an eyebrow. He thought he caught a flicker of… something… in Lan Wangj's expression, but with that fucking *perfectly frozen* face, who could tell?

"What?" Wei Wuxian asked, confused. Lan Wangji made an art form out of ignoring Wei Wuxian. Any deviation from this practice was… unusual.

"Wei Wuxian is... focused today," Lan Wangji said, his voice expressionless.

Wei Wuxian's stomach twisted. Yeah, Wei Wuxian got in his fair share of trouble for screwing in classes when he got bored. He was flippant and irreverent, but he wasn't *stupid.* Just because Lan Wangji was always a model student didn't mean Wei Wuxian couldn't focus on something when it interested him.

Lan Wangji thought he was an idiot.

Wei Wuxian put on a grin, effortlessly masking any internal twinge he might feel with a joke. "Oooh! Did I finally manage to catch the precious Second Jade's attention? How lucky of me!" He fluttered his eyelashes at Lan Wangji, feeling satisfied at the flare of annoyance in the man's amber eyes, and the slightest reddening of Lan Wangji's ears.

"Shameless," Lan Wangji stated, then went back to his reading.

The door to the library opened and one of the youngest disciples came in. He didn't look to be much older than six. His face was grave, his eyes red and shiny and his lower lip trembling. He walked silently over to a free desk, then carefully pulled out a small brush and ink pot and some

paper, his tiny hand trembling slightly. Lan Wangji observed him, a miniscule divot appearing between his smooth brows.

Wei Wuxian wondered if Lan Wangji was going to scold the boy for some sort of rule violation (was having emotions against the Lan code of conduct? Probably.).

But instead, he addressed the boy in a calm voice. "A-Ling."

The boy in question jerked slightly, evidently having been so deep in his misery that he had not realized he was not alone. He sprung to his feet and gave an absolutely adorably formal bow. "Hanguang Jun! I did not see you. Please forgive this one's rudeness in not greeting you."

Lan Wangji didn't smile, exactly. Wei Wuxian would swear his face didn't move but it somehow… softened. Wei Wuxian felt like he had just been kicked in the chest. What?

"A-Ling," Lan Wangji said, his large hand gesturing towards the empty paper. "Show me."

The little boy's lip quivered again briefly, then stiffened. "I can't make the characters right. The lines are all… wiggly and look bad. Everyone else can do it."

Wei Wuxian wondered if he was having an out of body experience as he watched Lan Wangji… Stiff and fucking *cold as ice* Lan Wangji sit next to the tiny boy and explain the sequencing and pressure required to get the brush strokes right.

When Lan Wangji's much larger hand took the boy's tiny one to guide, Wei Wuxian made a sort of strangled sound. Lan Wangji looked up at him and narrowed his eyes, his hand not stopping as he continued to guide the little boy.

Nope , Wei Wuxian thought, forcing his gaze back to the book in his hands. No fucking way was he going to process that image. For his own sanity, he needed Lan Wangji to remain an asshole. That just… had to stay true or Wei Wuxian was going to lose his fucking mind.

Perfect people were annoying. How were regular people supposed to deal with the comparison? Wei Wuxian didn't need any additional reminders of all the myriad of ways he already fell short of what other people wanted from him.

He moved on to the next book, skimming through but finding nothing. He pulled out a scroll and had only given its contents a cursory glance before his eyes caught on a line of characters, and his brain instantly snapped into focus. The issue with lightning attacks was that - while very strong - they required very precise targeting. With a creature that moved very quickly, this was a problem. But the talisman description for fog that he was reading gave him an idea -

"Wei Wuxian. I did not know you were visiting us."

Wei Wuxian's head lifted at the smooth, friendly voice addressing him. Evidently he had been reading long enough that the novice disciple had gotten the help he needed and had left the library. Lan Wangji was still there, though he had gone back to reading his book with absolute focus. Wei Wuxian bowed to Lan Xichen, showing much more respect for the First Jade than he did for anyone else in GusuLan.

“Sect Leader, Lan Xichen. Thank you again for your generosity in allowing me to use some of the library.”

Lan Xichen nodded graciously. He was young for a sect leader, though still several years older than Wei Wuxian, but he had an aura of both strength and serenity that his title of “First Jade” captured. He had a warmth, too, though, that was different from most of the GusuLan seniors. Wei Wuxian sometimes wondered what it would have been like to have a sect leader like Lan Xichen, but such thoughts were quickly dismissed. Most likely Wei Wuxian would have found a way to frustrate and disappoint him, too, like he had everyone else.

Still, Wei Wuxian enjoyed when Lan Xichen would stop by when he was visiting Cloud Recesses and ask him about his research. The older man always had a slight smile as Wei Wuxian rambled on about whatever the latest thing that had caught his eclectic fancy was.

The man made a slight gesture with his elegant fingers, waving it off. “You did a service to the Lan sect, Wei Wuxian. It is the least we can do.”

Wei Wuxian thought he sensed a slight motion from where Lan Wangji was sitting, but when he glanced over the man was as still and perfect as always.

Lan Xichen looked down at the collection of books and scrolls piled on the desk where Wei Wuxian was seated. “It is always interesting to me to see the collection of topics you study when you visit us, Wei Wuxian.” He picked up several of the texts haphazardly strewn across the table top. “Mythic creatures, fog control, and water purification. Dare I enquire what you are working on that requires such an eclectic mix of content?”

“There have been signs of some sort of water poisoning near a village I passed through recently. Some of the locals told me about it while I was returning from a night hunt in a nearby area.” Wei Wuxian gave a soft smile as he summarized what he’d heard from Wen Ning and A-Yuan, and their excitement to share information on the strange things they’d seen on a trip they had taken to gather medicinal herbs for Wen Ning’s sister in the neighboring mountains.

“Won’t the local sect handle it?” Lan Xichen asked. Of course, being an honorable clan leader, his first thought would be to help those around him in need. If only others were as noble.

“The region where it is located is outside any Sect territory.” Wei Wuxian shrugged. “So I told the villagers I would help out.”

“What is the cause of the poisoning?”

It occurred to Wei Wuxian that - despite being an incredibly fast reader - Lan Wangji hadn’t turned a page in his book recently, though his eyes remained locked on the page in front of him.

“There are several things it could be,” Wei Wuxian replied, rubbing the bridge of his nose thoughtfully. “But at least a few of them could prove troublesome. I want to have my bases covered.”

Lan Xichen inclined his head in agreement. “Reasonable. Have you considered asking one of the sects near the village for assistance, even if it is outside their territory?”

Wei Wuxian breathed out a short laugh, trying to imagine approaching Wen Ruohan or Wen Chao to ask for help with anything that didn't directly benefit them. Wen Chao was a huge fucking dick who wouldn't give a shit if a small village on his borders that had been poisoned by the creation of a toxic swamp, and Wen Ruohan would probably just go kill the village pre-emtively for daring to ask for his help.

"Yeah. That's not gonna happen," Wei Wuxian said tightly. Lan Xichen raised an eyebrow, but didn't comment. He could probably figure out who the closest sect was based on Wei Wuxian's comment. "It's fine. I work better alone anyway. That way no one has to get hurt if I mess something up by trying something stupid."

Wei Wuxian laughed lightly, though the truth of the statement still threaded through his words with a hard edge. Being a rogue cultivator has meant that he has to fight the majority of his battles alone. Lan Xichen frowned slightly.

"Your inventions have never been stupid, cultivator Wei," Lan Xichen said seriously. "The binding spell that you created battling the Slaughter Tortoise was critical in the creature's defeat."

Wei Wuxian shrugged, uncomfortable with the praise. "Lan Zhan was the one who killed it, in the end. I just climbed inside its shell and pissed it off." He tried not to think about what he'd found inside that shell. The bodies, the stench. The strange stone seal in the sword. Since then, he'd become much more sensitized to the presence of resentful spiritual energy, but he knew better than to mention it to anyone. That was one topic that he was *very* careful not to research in the Cloud Recesses library. Or anywhere, given how taboo it was. Yet another rule that Wei Wuxian didn't believe was justified and, therefore, chose not to follow.

Lan Xichen glanced over to where his brother was still (allegedly) reading his book. "Well. We were grateful to have you both back safely, however it happened. It was good seeing you again, Wei Wuxian."

With that, the man left Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji alone in the library.

"Not stupid. Clever," Lan Wangji said, still not looking up from his fucking book.

Wei Wuxian had been ready for a snarky comment (or, more like a snarkily twitched eyelid), and the words Lan Wangji spoke took a minute to process. "Lan Zhan... What?"

Lan Wangji closed his book and stood, his back perfectly straight as he walked gracefully over to replace the book on its shelf, white robes moving fluidly around him. "Wei Ying's talismans."

For once, Wei Wuxian was at a loss for words. Did Lan Wangji just… *compliment* him? Perhaps the man was running a fever. Wei Wuxian had heard there was one going around. Or maybe Wei Wuxian had contracted it and this was all some sort of hallucination.

Noticing that it was approaching 9pm and he would be evicted from the library shortly for curfew, Wei Wuxian reshelved the books and scrolls he'd been reading. Despite what others might say, Wei Wuxian had manners when he wanted to. He was just replacing the volume on mythical creatures when he noticed a slightly older book that he hadn't seen before. Deciding he had time to give it a quick skim before Lan Qiren caught him, Wei Wuxian sat in the closest

desk and began flipping through the pages. His grey eyes widened when they landed on an illustration in the middle of the book.

" *Fuck,* " he cursed. This was so much worse than what he had thought. And given his bent for pessimism, that was saying something. He didn't take the time to reshelve the book as he broke yet another rule of Cloud Recesses and ran from the building. He had to get back to the small village near Yiling.

To be continued...

Please let me know what you think! This is my first fic in this fandom and I am super nervous.

Chapter 2: Legends and Myths

Wei Wuxian usually preferred to walk when he traveled. He liked meeting people, and stopping at villages to hear about what was going on in the area. This time, however, he traveled as many cultivators did and used his spiritual sword, *Suibian,* to get to the small Yiling village as quickly as possible. He was nearly dizzy with relief when he saw small, lazy plumes of smoke coming from some of the chimneys as the sun had just begun to set.

He wasn't too late. The town wasn't washed away and the villagers were still alive.

"Uncle Xian! Uncle Xian!" Wen Yuan came running down the narrow dirt path that led to the village, his small, chubby legs pumping. Wei Wuxian frowned as he noticed the boy's movements seemed slower and slightly stiffer than usual. "You're back! Did you bring me a present?"

Wei Wuxian's chest felt as though it was both constricting and expanding simultaneously as the small boy launched himself at Wei Wuxian and wrapped his arms around Wei Wuxian's legs and held him tight. He didn't really let himself think about how much he had enjoyed being a senior brother at Lotus Pier, and the time he'd spent with the younger cultivators. The village was small, poor and had only two cultivators in it, but it was the closest he'd felt to home in many years.

“Sorry, A-Yuan. Maybe next time,” he reached down and ruffled the boy’s soft hair, his eyes narrowing as he saw a slightly bluish tinge to the child’s lips and around his eyes.

“Uncle Poor! You never buy me anything,” Wen Yuan laughed, but it sounded threadier than his normal clear, bright laughter.

“Did you do what I told you and Wen Ning to do while I was gone?”

A-Yuan looked up at him from where he was still wrapped tightly around Wei Wuxian’s leg like a tiny vine and nodded solemnly. “We stayed away from the weird stinky water. And we kept our...our ‘eyes out for more’, just like you told us to. I kepted *both* my eyes out.”

Wei Wuxian smiled, his mind already sorting through options to remove the toxin from the boy’s body while still leaving himself capable of fighting the creature he knew he would face. He didn’t know very many healing spells, and poisons were tricky. Especially poisons from legendary beasts. If A-Yuan had truly stayed away from the toxic area they’d shown him before, then he shouldn’t be showing signs of poison. Wei Wuxian was careful to keep his voice and smile light and calm.

“Both eyes? Great job. And did you find any more patches?”

“Yeah!” The boy leapt up with excitement, stumbling slightly, and Wei Wuxian felt dread settle heavily in his stomach. “It’s just up the mountain from the village! Let me show you!”

If the poison was uphill from the village, that meant that their water supply was tainted. It also meant the creature had circled around the town. It had marked its target.

“A-Yuan,” Wei Wuxian quickly placed a hand on the boy’s arm to keep him from running off. “I need you to do me a favor. It’s very important.”

Wen Yuan looked at him, a crease of concern showing on his forehead. “Uncle Poor looks worried.”

Wei Wuxian took a breath, not wanting to frighten the child, but knowing that there was no way to fully shield him from what was about to happen.

“I know A-Yuan will do what I ask him to do, so I’m not worried.” The boy’s eyes lit up at the praise, and it twisted something in Wei Wuxian’s chest. “But some of the bad water washed down the hill into the village well, and I think it is making you sick. So I need to take the bad water out of your body, or you will get worse. Ok?”

A-Yuan looked at him, his expression going from one of a small child to one of an adult in a flash, his small eyes already having seen too much danger and pain in the world.

“Yeah,” A-Yuan said slowly. “Lots of people are sick. Auntie Qing went to look for some medicine for them.”

Wei Wuxian cursed internally that Wen Qing was not here, but at least she would be safe. “Did Wen Ning go with her?”

“No. Uncle Ning is in town taking care of Granny Wen and Uncle 6, and a few others who are really sick. He’s been worried. Can you take the bad water out of all of them?” Wen Yuan asked hopefully.

Wei Wuxian thought about whether it would be possible, but realized he would only incapacitate himself and leave the village defenseless if he tried. He would rely on Wen Qing to arrive with medicine that will work. She was better at healing than he could ever hope to be.

“I need to go and get rid of the creature that’s spoiling the water first. But since you’re already here, let me take care of you first and then you can help Wen Qing fix the others, ok?”

“Yes!” A-Yuan said excitedly. He loved to help Wen Qing and Wen Ning whenever they let him. “But where will Brother Xian put the bad water he takes out of me?” Wen Yuan asked curiously.

“I’ll just transfer it away from your body so that it won’t hurt you,” Wei Wuxian dodged easily. He might not know much about poisons or medicines, but he knew for sure that a certain amount of poison in a small body would do more damage than that same amount of poison in a larger body. Wei Wuxian would transfer it to his own left hand, then tie his hand off to slow the circulation and trap as much of it there while he took care of the creature. Hopefully Wen Qing would be back by then with a treatment.

Even if it went badly, a hand was a small thing to sacrifice compared to a child. Wei Wuxian was comfortable with his decision.

“Now, sit still and let me get it out of you. If you can’t sit still on your own, I’ll have to plant you in the ground with the turnips to hold you down.”

A-Yuan shrieked with laughter, just as Wei Wuxian had hoped, but managed to hold himself still while Wei Wuxian transferred the toxin from the child’s body into the flesh of his own left hand. He tightened the black fabric wrapping he had on his left forearm to keep the poison somewhat contained, careful not to over-tighten and cut off circulation all together.

“Now, here’s what I need you to do,” he told Wen Yuan, crouching down next to the child and wrapping an arm around the boy’s shoulders. “You see that rock, way up on top of that hill over there?” he pointed to the highest point in the area that didn’t require a steep climb to reach.

“I see it!” A-Yuan said enthusiastically.

“It’s very important that you go up to that rock and wait for Wen Qing. She will be able to find you there, and you can warn her about the water before she reaches the village. When you see her, call her over to you but don’t go down to her, ok? That is *very* important. Don’t go back to the village. I will be sending the others to meet you here. I need you to tell Wen Qing that I’ve gone to take care of the thing that’s spoiled the water.”

Wei Wuxian knew that - if A-Yuan thought he was going to higher ground to help - then he would follow instruction. If Wei Wuxian told him to go there to be safe, there was a good chance the little boy would follow him instead to try to help.

A-Yuan nodded solemnly, “I won’t forget. I can do it.”

Wei Wuxian nodded, gave the child's hair one last ruffle, and watched as A-Yuan started running in the direction Wei Wuxian had told him to go. We Wuxian then turned and started running towards the village to warn the others to seek higher ground. He hoped they could make it out before the creature attacked the village.

He wondered, though, what could have brought the ancient beast out of hibernation, and why it would attack such a small and inconsequential village.

It didn't make sense. Wei Wuxian puzzled over it as he made his way towards the settlement.

Wen Ning must have seen him approaching the village, because he was already halfway from the village to meet him. He waved his arm in greeting, though the rapidly fading light was making it harder to see.

Wen Ning opened his mouth and called out to him, but the sound was lost by the crash of a huge eruption behind them. Wei Wuxian drew *Suibian* and was in motion before he'd even completed the thought, reaching Wen Ning just as a huge wall of toxic water flooded over the young man.

Wei Wuxian managed to grab Wen Ning's wrist as he was sucked down, pulling with all his strength to get him out of the rushing water and onto his sword. Wen Ning was unconscious by the time he got him out. He hadn't been underwater long enough to be due to lack of air, so it must be the toxin's effects.

He redirected *Suibian* to where he had last seen A-Yuan, relieved to see the tiny figure standing on the rocks safely above the dangerous reach of the water that had flooded the narrow valley in an instant.

Guilt and anguish surged through Wei Wuxian. He was too late. The other villagers would not survive. Wen Ning might not survive. He was grateful that he'd been able to save A-Yuan, at least. But if he'd only arrived an *hour* earlier, he might have been able to save them all. Why hadn't he figured it out sooner?!

The sounds of snapping boards and surging waters brought him back to the present. The creature was still there. What he had read of *Xiangliu* was that it marked its prey, and consumed them one by one after first slowing them with poison, then drowning them. He had hopefully cleared A-Yuan of the mark, but Wen Ning was flooded with the toxin. There was no way Wei Wuxian could absorb it all from the young man's body and still have the strength to battle the creature.

He brought Wen Ning over to where A-Yuan was crying on the rock. "It's gone! The village! Granny Wen! Uncle Six!" A-Yuan threw himself into Wei Wuxian's arms, crying and shaking. Wei Wuxian held him tightly, letting the storm of emotions wash over him. This was all his fault. A-Yuan had lost his home and the remnants of his family and it was all Wei Wuxian's fault.

"Thank you for saving me, and Brother Ning," A-Yuan choked out, clutching even tighter at Wei Wuxian's robe.

"No, I -," Wei Wuxian turned his face away, unable to bear the praise. "A-Yuan. I'm sorry I wasn't here sooner."

A-Yuan sniffled. “If you’d come sooner, wouldn’t you and Brother Ning both been in the village? Then you’d both be… both be…” A-Yuan broke off crying again.

“Sh. Sh,” Wei Wuxian soothed, stroking the small boy’s hair. “It’s going to be ok. Wen Qing will be here soon, and she will take care of you and give Wen Ning something to help him wake up.”

Though Wen Ning was broader in his body than Wei Wuxian, Wei Wuxian managed to carry him over to the other side of the hill, further away from the water. A-Yuan followed, clutching Wei Wuxian’s robe tightly.

“I can’t stay too long. I need to go and take care of the creature that did this, ok, Yuan-er?”

A-Yuan looked like he wanted to disagree, but he drew a shaky breath and bravely nodded his head.

“Wen Ning will be ok as soon as Wen Qing gets here. You know she’d never let anything happen to him,” Wei Wuxian said, hoping that it was the truth. Wen Ning’s breathing was shallow but steady. It was already after sunset, so Wen Qing should be arriving soon.

He wished he could wait and make sure that Wen Ning and A-Yuan were ok, but waiting would mean drawing the monster to them. He couldn’t take that chance.

“I’ll be back soon. Stay quiet and wait for Wen Qing. I’ll send her a message to let her know how to find you.”

Wei Wuxian pulled out one of his paperman talismans, then activated it and sent it out to the road where Wen Qing would be approaching. He activated a second one for Wen Yuan, much to the child’s delight.

“So you won’t be alone, A-Yuan,” Wei Wuxian murmured, his throat constricted. He hated that he had to leave A-Yuan on his own, scared and devastated after witnessing the loss of his home and most of his family. Why had the creature chosen this small village? What crime could it possibly have committed?

He placed a gentle kiss on the boy’s head. A-Yuan hugged him fiercely, then sat down next to Wen Ning, holding the paper man on his hand. “Don’t be scared, Uncle Ning. I’m here to protect you,” the child said, reaching out to take Wen Ning’s hand.

Wei Wuxian’s eyes burned, but he forced a smile.

“Be careful, Uncle Poor,” A-Yuan said solemnly.

Wei Wuxian nodded, unable to speak a reply. Why was the world always like this? He waved, then turned back to where the destroyed village lay.

“ *Hurry, Wen Qing* ,” he thought, wishing he could summon her here with a spell. Or teleport Wen Ning and A-Yuan away to safety.

But he could do neither of those things. All he could do was slay the creature that had destroyed their home and their lives.

It was time to go hunting.

Night had fully fallen, clouds obscuring the moon, making Wei Wuxian nearly invisible in the shadows with his dark hair and black robes. He stilled his breathing and closed his eyes, focusing on slowing his metabolism to keep his body temperature low and the spread of the toxin from his hand slow. He would pay for it later. Lowering one's body temperature through force of will had the same hypothermic effects as falling into a frozen river, but Wei Wuxian didn't really care about it at the moment. The *Xiangliu* , like most night hunting snakes, had shit vision but really, *really* good ability to detect scents and body heat. And Wei Wuxian already carried the beast's chemical marker in his body.

He had no desire to find himself going from the hunt *er* to the hunt *ed.*

There were several monsters that tracked their prey by detecting body heat, so Wei Wuxian had spent the last two years cultivating techniques to control his body temperature in his spare time. He'd read about body temperature control during meditation in the Lan sect library (while he was supposed to be doing his punishment of rewriting their stupid *three thousand rules* after asking too many questions in a lecture he had gone to attend. Screw Lan Qiren, anyway). Lan Zhan had caught him, but he had at least let Wei Wuxian finish reading the text before he had made him write the Lan code of conduct out *again* for it. At least Lan Zhan was nice to look at, even if he was an up-tight, rule-obsessed dick. All that ridiculous hotness was absolutely wasted on Lan Zhan.

Though… perhaps that was best for everyone involved , Wei Wuxian thought as he waited for the monster to show itself. Patience was a part of being a successful night hunter. Or at least a breathing one.

The creature would have expended a lot of its energy in the attack, and likely wasn't used to its prey (which it had poisoned and then drowned) putting up much of a fight. At least, that was what Wei Wuxian was hoping for.

He felt the cold night air slice through the fabric of his robes, chilling him further. Being a rogue cultivator meant that he didn't have money to spend on layer upon layer of clothing. His red tunic and under robe, black pants and black outer robe were all he had. Normally, he didn't mind it, but when his body temperature was already so low, he wished for a few extra layers.

A tiny scraping sound had Wei Wuxian's head snapping to his right, just in time to see a slight movement of a shadow in between two large rocks almost directly uphill from where he was standing.

Fuck, Wei Wuxian cursed silently. Being downhill from a creature that spewed out poisonous water when you wanted to use a lightning attack was not a great configuration. But if Wei Wuxian moved, he would be spotted. His plan had had a lot of holes in it, but it sucked to hit such a big one so early.

Wei Wuxian was reckless, but he wasn't *stupid.* Usually.

Tonight's hunt might actually fall into the stupid category, if Wei Wuxian were honest about it. It was fine to experiment with *one* technique on a hunt. But usually not three or four, and

certainly not up against a legendary monster that - as far as he'd read - no cultivator had been able to seriously injure, much less kill. Even if the thing turned out to be only some sort of amped up demon snake and not the legendary *Xiangliu* , it was a close enough copy to make this hunt seriously insane.

If Wei Wuxian still belonged to a sect where he could ask his fellow disciples for help, or the sect leader for guidance, then maybe...

He shoved the useless thought down. He would probably only end up getting other people hurt if he hunted with them. This was for the best. And it wasn't like he would have had time to ask for help, anyway. By the time he returned with reinforcements, Wen Ning and A-Yuan would be dead.

Wei Wuxian forced himself not to think about how he had failed them, or wonder how A-Yuan was holding up. It wouldn't help them for him to be self-indulgent and emotional right now.

The slight scraping sound came again, closer this time, and Wei Wuxian knew he was running out of time. Wei Wuxian mentally ran through his options. If he moved, the *Xiangliu* would detect him and immediately attack, making it basically impossible for Wei Wuxian to get the first strike off before it did.

If he tried to attack from where he currently was, he would be downhill from the toxic water the monster would spew, and too far away to pinpoint the beasts' heads with any sort of accuracy for a successful pre-emptive strike.

So. That killed the first two attack plans he'd hoped for. He slowly drew *Suibian* from its sheath, just enough to nick his finger, and used the blood to write the last line completing the key figure in the talisman before powering it up with his spiritual energy.

The full moon slipped out from behind the small band of clouds that had been covering it, bathing the rocky mountainside in a silvery glow. Wei Wuxian looked up, tracking the pace and movement of the clouds. He'd have about a minute of pretty decent light before the next line of clouds covered the moon again.

Using his temporary advantage of sight, he scanned the terrain for signs of his prey. You'd think a giant, nine-headed snake would be easy to spot, but it wasn't. It had centuries of avoiding enemies, so Wei Wuxian assumed it must be good at it. But there was no mistaking the stench of the toxic air wafting from somewhere nearby. There was also something else, though. Something that almost felt like the resentful energy of fierce corpses, except… it wasn't. Wei Wuxian felt the stone seal that he'd found inside the sword he discovered in the Slaughter Tortoise vibrate slightly, almost in resonance with whatever he was sensing. It wasn't a comforting thought, but there was no time to ponder the mystery.

There was a flicker of movement outside the corner of his eye. Wei Wuxian narrowed his eyes to try to find the source but all he could see was endless rocks leading down into the swampy ravine below. He wasn't stupid enough to try a fire attack on against a creature that spews out enough water to flood an entire village. The ice talisman he'd been working on might make the snake brittle enough for Wei Wuxian to break through the supposedly impenetrable scales. It was also a spell that didn't require a high degree of precision, so it was a good thing to try when he wasn't exactly sure where the vulnerable spots of the creature were.

There , he thought as he saw the flicker of motion again, and instantly shoved the powered-up talisman at the source of the motion. There was a flash of red light, and the air temperature dropped abruptly, even from back where he stood. Wei Wuxian flew forward with *Suibian* extended, just as the giant creature reared back, extending up.

And up.

And *UP.*

"Oh, fuck," Wei Wuxian muttered as he clenched his jaw, not pausing in his attack. The odd sense of resentful energy was stronger now that he was getting closer to the creature, but he couldn't see the source.

"Fuck. Ha-ha. Oh, shit. That's a big snake." He could see the crystals of ice on the creature's scales, but had no idea how long they'd hold or how deep they'd penetrated.

Not deep enough to keep it from moving, though. *Shit* .

He focused his spiritual energy into his blade, bringing it down with all his strength and all his will against the creature's scales, just below where the nine heads branched out from its necks. Sparks flew, and he felt the shock of the blow travel all the way up his arm into his shoulder.

He dodged one of the heads that was surging down at him in a viper strike, and felt its fangs tear through the fabric of his sleeve, slashing into his flesh. The heat that seared through the wound was enough to let him know that the creature had gotten him with its poison as well as its fangs. Fortunately, it had injured the arm that Wei Wuxian had already tied off to hold the poison from Wen Yuan's body.

"Shit!" He cursed as he saw that there wasn't even a scratch where *Suibian* had struck the creature. Not to be vain, but few cultivators were as good with a sword as Wei Wuxian. If *Suibian* couldn't even leave a mark, there was no point in trying again. None of the ice or sword attacks he'd sketched out in his contingency planning were going to work for shit. And Wei Wuxian still didn't know what was generating the dark energy he could feel surging around him.

"Fuck," he cursed, his mind racing to find options as he dodged strike after strike from the beasts' heads. He could feel blood rapidly soaking through his sleeves from the wound in his arm. The odd sense of resentful energy was stronger now that he was getting closer to the creature, but he still couldn't see the source. Wei Wuxian would run out of energy soon. He didn't have time to play around guessing.

He sketched out a general talisman with the characters for 'make visible', but then added the ones for resentful energy as well, powering it up and shooting it at the creature. Luckily, this experiment worked. There was a sudden dark glow of roiling shadows coiling around the beast. Wei Wuxian could make out the sigil of the Wen clan, but also, lower down, the symbols for the GusuLan and Yunmeng Jiang sects, though they were smaller and marked differently.

What the hell? What did that… Why...

He was so busy focusing on the creature's heads that he forgot about its tail, which caught him in a full body blow and sent him crashing into the rocky cliff. The impact stunned him

momentarily, and his head swam dizzily as he forced himself to move just in time to avoid three of the snake's heads converging on him.

He gritted his teeth, forcing the pain in his back and ribs out of his mind. So far, all he'd succeeded in doing was pissing the monster off more, which would do nothing to help A-Yuan and Wen Ning.

"Shit!" His mind scrambled through the haze of pain to come up with some sort of plan.

"Winging it" was quite a bit further down his list of options than he would have liked to have already arrived at, but there just hadn't been enough time to come up with an actual plan. He latched onto a vague idea of combining what he knew of chain lightning and fog techniques. He had zero practical experimentation in trying this, and there was a really high chance of draining himself of most, if not all, of his remaining spiritual energy. Draining himself when he was this injured as well as hypothermic was not an option he would normally have chosen, but it was what it was. He only hoped Wen Qing had treated Wen Ning and gotten them out of there.

The tip of Wei Wuxian's foot touched down on a rock, and he immediately pushed off at an angle, making the trajectory of his body as hard to predict as possible. He heard the sound of the rock crashing behind him only a fraction of a second after he'd moved out of the way. Wei Wuxian ignored the searing pain in his arm and chest as he rapidly drew a simple talisman, setting dozen's of large, glowing butterfly images fluttering wildly around the snakes' heads.

Luckily, the creature was momentarily distracted.

The legendary snake might be big, but thank the gods it was not very smart. Wei Wuxian landed lightly, his slender fingers instantly tracing out a much more intricate talisman. He just needed a few seconds of distraction to think through exactly what characters he needed and how to link them… some of the array aspects he'd been thinking about trying in talisman form....

" *There!"* Wei Wuxian blew out a short breath for luck then sent the experimental talisman going, dumping as much of his spiritual energy in it as he possibly could.

It was an all or nothing move. If this didn't work, he was in trouble and so were his friends.

The rocks surrounding the creature lit up with blinding, flickering blue-white lightning, coiling around the rocks and racing up the watery paths that trailed around the creature. The water made the spell much more effective than Wei Wuxian had expected. He shielded his eyes, momentarily blinded.

The *Xiangliu* screamed from all nine heads, a sound that Wei Wuxian did not know snakes could make, as the electricity pierced through its body where swords could not, locking the creatures' nervous system up.

It was shocked, but it wasn't dead.

Wei Wuxian didn't waste time celebrating that his half-thought-out talisman had actually *worked* , because he had absolutely no idea how long the creature would be stunned for. His head was starting to swim from the combination of the toxin and being nearly completely energy drained. He pulled out the more standard bold lightning talisman that he had created in advance and flung

it directly at the place where the strange clan markings had appeared on the creature at the juncture of its many throats.

The blast wasn't as large as it could have been if Wei Wuxian had been able to power it up fully, but it struck home. The water in the creature's body instantaneously vaporized at the point of the lightning strike. Five of the beast's heads were separated from its body, but that left four remaining. Foul water spewed from the holes in *Xiangliu's* body, flooding the ground with water.

It took less than a second for Wei Wuxian to realize the danger he was now in. From his own attack. The chain lightning spell was still in effect, and Wei Wuxian knew if he hit the ground where the blue lightning still coiled and danced, he would be dead.

He cast a simple spell with the last of his strength, the reverse of a restraining spell that would hopefully push him out of the lightning's range.

The last thing he saw before losing consciousness was the creature collapsing and a flash of something white. *Xiangliu* wasn't dead, but it was at least down. He hoped Wen Ning, A-Yuan and Wen Qing would be far away when it woke up.

Then everything went black.

He woke to the feeling of pain everywhere in his body, but there was a hand gently smoothing the hair from his face. He couldn't quite open his eyes, but there was only one person who he could remember who had ever touched him so gently.

"Shijie?" he breathed out.

The hand stilled, but didn't pull away. Wei Wuxian tried to speak again, but the blackness pulled him under again.

The next time Wei Wuxian became aware of his surroundings, he could hear beautiful music playing. He hadn't heard a lot of healing music, but he was sure that that was what he was hearing. He could feel the pure, spiritual energy washing over his body.

He was able to open his eyes, with a bit of effort. The room is light, beautiful but sparse. He had definitely never been in this particular room before, but something about the spare elegance of it is familiar. He turned his head to the side, not feeling ready to attempt something as strenuous as sitting up, but wanting to see who is playing the music. He was shocked to see Lan Wangji sitting at a table across the room from him, playing the guqin, his expression serene and focused.

Wei Wuxian could only blink as he took in the image. As usual, Lan Wangji was dressed in pristine white with only the palest blue. Morning sunlight streamed through the window, making him seem to glow. His large, elegant hands moved over the seven strings of the guqin with a strong, fluid grace that only a true master of the instrument could attain. Wei Wuxian realized that he'd never seen Lan Wangji play before. He had definitely been missing out, if this is what he always looks like.

“Beautiful,” Wei Wuxian murmured, not sure if he meant the music or the player. Both?

His slurred words caused Lan Wangji’s eyes to snap up to meet his, and he quickly brought the song to a close.

“You are awake,” Lan Wangji said calmly, though the tips of his ears had gone pink. Though perhaps that was just a trick of the shifting sunlight in the room.

“I think so? I didn’t really expect to be,” Wei Wuxian breathed out a laugh. A small crease appeared between Lan Wangji’s brows. Memories of his last battle flooded in, and Wei Wuxian abruptly tried to sit up, ignoring the pain that lanced through his body.

“Lan Zhan... I didn’t finish it! The *Xiangliu*... I have to find A-Yuan and Wen Ning. I have to get back to-”

“Rest,” Lang Wangji’s large hand was splayed across Wei Wuxian’s chest, pressing him gently back down into the bed. “The *Xiangliu* is dead. Your friends are safe.”

Wei Wuxian blinked. He had no idea how Lan Wangji had crossed the room so quickly or how he somehow knew what Wei Wuxian was worried about. Actually, there were a lot of things that didn’t make sense now that his mind was functioning again.

“How… how do you know about the *Xiangliu* ? Where am I? And why are you here?”

Lan Wangji simply looked at him with no expression whatsoever. “Cloud recesses,” was all he replied, as though that answered all of Wei Wuxian’s questions. Which it really *didn’t* , but it definitely added several new ones.

“Lan Zhan, what -”

“Rest, Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji repeated, his hand still resting heavily on Wei Wuxian’s chest. It was so strange, Wei Wuxian thought, groggily. He knew that Lan Wangji didn’t like him, and hated the fact that Wei Wuxian was allowed into Cloud Recesses to use the library. But somehow Lan Wangji’s touch was comforting. Wei Wuxian also knew with absolute certainty that - if Lan Wangji said Wen Ning, A-Yuan and Wen Qing were safe - then they were.

Wei Wuxian was trying to make sense of that when sleep overtook him again.

To be continued...

Chapter 3: Gossip is Forbidden in Cloud Recesses

The next time Wei Wuxian woke up, he still felt disoriented, but was at least able to take better stock of his own body. The arm that the demon snake had bitten was still weak, but he could both feel and move his fingers, so that was a major win. He realized that someone must have not just healed the wound, but also removed the poison.

He opened his eyes, finding the widows dark and only a single, small lantern lit to illuminate the room. He wasn't in an infirmary or an inn, but other than that he couldn't see enough of his surroundings to be sure. Where was it?He looked down at himself, finding that he was clothed in a simple white robe and nothing else. His skin was free of blood and dirt, so someone had bathed him. Who would bother? The bed linens were of a fine quality, much nicer than any of the inns he could afford to stay in or the rough blankets of the village he had tried to save. Maybe his hallucination of Lan Zhan sitting by his bedside and playing him music in the Cloud Recesses had been real, as nonsensical as it seemed.

His mind was still too hazy to make much sense of anything other than the fact that he was in much less pain than before and could sense no imminent threats around him at the moment. His body did not feel strong, yet, but neither did it feel broken. He wondered how long he'd been out for, and what had happened to Wen Ning and A-Yuan. There was a privacy screen shielding his bed from the rest of the room, so he had no idea if he was alone or not.

There was a motion near the foot of his bed, and he looked over to see Wen Qing approaching him, answering at least one of his questions, but triggering several more. Not alone, but then… where was he that Wen Qing was also here? Surely not in Cloud Recesses.

"It's about time you woke up," she said briskly, setting her fingers to the base of his throat. He could feel a thin ribbon of her spiritual energy entering his body. It felt… clean and precise.

"A-Yuan-," he began, but Wen Qing cut him off.

"Is safe. As is Wen Ning." She opened his robe with an efficiency born of years of treating patients, examining his ribs one by one with her precise, clinical touch. "They are resting, and you will not wake them just to satisfy your curiosity. They will both visit you in the morning, now that you have regained consciousness."

He turned his head and closed his eyes. Only two people. In the whole village, he'd only managed to save *two people* .

"I'm sorry," he managed, though his throat was constricted with guilt.

Strong fingers gripped his chin, and his eyes flared open in shock as Wen Qing turned his face to meet her gaze.

"Do not. Apologize."

Wei Wuxian clenched his jaw, then forced out. "The others. They're all dead." It wasn't a question, though he wished it could have been.

“Yes,” she confirmed, her face impassive, though he knew she felt the loss much more acutely than he did. They had been her family, after all, not his.

He had lost his original family to death. His adoptive family to pride. And just when he thought he’d found a new family, he’d lost them to his own inadequacies.

“I should have gotten there sooner,” he bit out. The heavy weight of guilt and failure was familiar and unwelcome pressing down on his chest. A giant beast, stepping on him and crushing him beneath its weight.

“Are you really that arrogant?” Wen Qing asked sharply, her dark eyes flashing with anger as they locked with his.

“What?” Wei Wuxian asked, confused. Surely she must resent him… must know how - if he had just been a little bit smarter, a little bit faster - he could have saved so many more of her kin.

“You warned my little brother and A-Yuan about the toxic areas, and told them to have me search for an antidote. You researched and identified the signs of a creature that hasn’t been seen in centuries. I did not witness the battle, but from what A-Yuan described about what he saw from a distance, you also came up with entirely new techniques to try to fight it. You were actually *successful* , where no cultivator had ever been before and nearly died trying to save a group of people that you have no obligation to. You literally pulled my little brother from certain death.”

She drew a breath, her voice shaking only the tiniest bit before her mask of complete composure slipped back over her face. It was a skill that Wei Wuxian would never have, his own heart always laid so bare on his face.

Wei Wuxian could only blink. The words she said were all true, he supposed, in a certain sense. But they made him sound like a hero, rather than the failure he knew he had been. Why didn’t she see it?

“But they still all died. It wasn’t enough.”

“Not all of them. You didn’t unleash the creature on my village,” she snapped, and Wei Wuxian saw the nearly invisible flicker of deep grief that she was trying so hard to hold back. “And don’t think I don’t know what you did with A-Yuan.”

“What did Wei Ying do with A-Yuan?” A deep voice came from deeper in the shadows of the room, and Lan Wangji moved gracefully forward into Wei Wuxian’s field of vision within the small circle of light cast by the lantern. Though the Second Jade’s hair and white robes were as pristine as always, Wei Wuxian somehow knew Lan Wangji had been sleeping. Watching over him? Again, that made no sense.

“Isn’t it past nine, Lan Zhan? Surely all good Lan cultivators should be tucked safely in their beds by now,” Wei Wuxian let his lips curve into a smirk, much more comfortable to slip into the role of miscreant (‘little shit’, Jiang Cheng would have said) than he was to continue to hear Wen Qing’s undeserved praise.

Both Wen Qing and Lan Zhan ignored his words.

“Wen Ning and A-Yuan had been poisoned from the well, along with the rest of the village. I was spared because I had already left to gather ingredients for the antidote. But A-Yuan’s body was free of the toxin already when I reached him. He told me that his ‘Xian-gege’ had healed him, but Wei Wuxian has nowhere near the skill level required as a healer to neutralize this type of toxin.”

“Hey! You wound me, Wen Qing!” Wei Wuxian cried out in feigned outrage. “Just because we aren’t all genius doctors like Wen Qing doesn’t mean I don’t know *anything* !”

Two sets of stern eyes fixed on him. “You know only the crudest of methods. You transferred the poison to yourself,” she turned to face Lan Wangji in exasperation. “ *Before* he went to fight the *Xiangliu* on his own.” The Wen doctor rounded on him again. “Do you have not a single shred of self-preservation or common sense in your entire body? How are you even still alive? If you are seeking death, there are easier ways. Just inform me in advance so I don’t waste my time healing you.”

The look Wen Qing gave Wei Wuxian was one that a stern teacher would give a recalcitrant child.

The look Lan Wangji gave him was… Wei Wuxian wasn’t exactly sure *what* it was, but he felt himself pinned to the bed, trapped by the intense, golden stare. Lan Wangji was definitely not happy with him. But why would it even matter? The village was far from GusuLan territory, and Wei Wuxian’s actions reflected on no one but himself.

“Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji said. Disapprovingly? Probably. Most people disapproved of Wei Ying.

Wei Wuxian didn’t really know why all his insides felt like they were climbing over each other under Lan Wangji’s intense gaze, so he defaulted to his usual behavior, throwing on a wide grin and a careless, teasing laugh. He tilted his head in a way that drew attention to the slender line of his neck, knowing exactly how provocative he would look in the scandalously thin robe he was wearing. His laugh was a combination of flirtatious and mocking that he knew would annoy the shit out of Lan Wangji.

Wei Wuxian’s brain was not up to figuring out anything that was going on around him at the moment and he really needed some time to get used to being conscious again before he tried to decode a puzzle as complicated as Lan Zhan taking care of him.

“Aw, Lan Zhan. You can’t claim I broke any of your Cloud Recesses’ precious rules if I wasn’t even in the Cloud Recesses! You must just like to discipline me, eh, Lan Zhan?”

Lan Wangji seemed to still (even more) for a moment, with an expression that Wei Wuxian couldn’t read (as usual). Wei Wuxian never dealt particularly well with uncertainty, so he decided to push until he could get a response from Lan Wangji that he could actually *read.* He boldly allowed his eyes to slide down Lan Wangji’s form.

“So if it isn’t for reporting a rule violation, what could bring the ever pure Lan Zhan to come to my bed in the middle of the night? How shameless! What would Lan Qiren say?”

Wen Qing made a soft sound of annoyance, though Wei Wuxian was absolutely sure he could see amusement in her eyes as well.

“Wei Wuxian. Stop wasting your limited energy with your ridiculous flirting and posturing,” she stated. “I’ve healed the cut on your arm and your broken ribs, but your body has still not fully recovered from the poison you absorbed and *whatever* it was you did to bring your body temperature so low. What were you *thinking?* ”

Wei Wuxian finally tore his gaze away from Lan Wangji, whose ears were once again reddening in the way that always absolutely delighted Wei Wuxian, even if it was always due to how angry Lan Wangji was with him.

Wei Wuxian gave a careless shrug. “Snakes hunt by scent and detecting body temperature. I couldn’t fully get rid of my scent, but I could stay downwind from it for that. I had to lower my body temperature, though, to get close enough to attack it,” Wei Wuxian explained simply, as though it was an obvious solution that anyone would have tried.

“How?” Lan Wangji asked.

Wei Wuxian blinked, unsure for an instant if Lan Wangji was joking, until he remembered that Lan Zhan never joked about anything. Surely, Lan Wangji knew this. It had been by studying *Lan Zhan* that Wei Wuxian had learned this technique himself.

“Same way you do when meditating. I know you know how, Lan Zhan. Your meditation technique and focus are far superior to mine.”

Lan Wangji frowned, so Wei Wuxian continued. “I mean, I just practiced how to do it when I wasn’t meditating. It’s the same principle, though. You can divert qi to the system that regulates the body’s temperature and maintain it for short periods of time even in active battle.”

Lan Wangji looked thoughtful.

Wen Qing looked annoyed.

“So you lowered your body temperature to battle a creature that spewed toxic water, at night, in the cold, while wasting valuable spiritual energy that you absolutely did not have? You are… I still don’t understand how you lived past childhood. Luckily, you had enough dumb luck to launch your half-dead body in the direction of a doctor who happened to have researched the specific poison, and were found within minutes. Otherwise Hanguang Jun would need to play *Inquiry* to find out what happened. Your spiritual energy was completely drained. You’d left literally *nothing* to restore your body’s temperature, much less heal any of your injuries. Did you *want* to die?”

Despite the anger in her voice, Wei Wuxian smiled. He had extensive experience with affection that showed itself as anger. Aside from his *shijie,* it was actually the only experience he had with affection at all. He wondered what Wen Qing would think of Jiang Cheng.

Wen Qing ignored his smile and walked over to a small brazier that held a pot of steaming liquid of some sort, then poured some of the dark brew into a small cup.

“Drink. I don’t care what you think about the taste, so don’t waste your breath telling me.” She helped him sit up with surprising gentleness despite her harsh tone, and he drank the medicinal tea she gave him.

It tasted like absolute shit, so Wei Wuxian assumed that meant it must be extremely effective medicine. No one would ever even *consider* drinking it, otherwise.

“I will get Xichen,” Lan Wangji stated.

“Zewu Jun can satisfy his curiosity in the morning,” Wen Qing spoke firmly, clearly expecting to be obeyed by the GusuLan sect leader’s brother even in his own clan's territory. “Wei Wuxian has regained consciousness, but he still needs rest. And so do you, Hanguang Jun.”

What had Lan Zhan been doing that he also required rest? Had he been injured by *Xiangliu* as well? Wei Wuxian wanted to ask, but couldn’t quite make himself.

Lan Wangji looked at her a moment, clearly debating whether or not he would agree. Wen Qing narrowed her eyes at him and - much to Wei Wuxian’s surprise - Lan Wangji gave a slight nod to her. He turned and looked directly at Wei Wuxian for several moments, but his expression was as cool and unreadable as ever.

“Wei Ying,” he said, but Wei Wuxian wasn’t sure what to make of his tone. Reprimanding? Judging? Wei Wuxian wasn’t sure, and was too tired to figure it out. Lan Wangji’s expressions needed to come with a secret decoder ring. Wei Wuxian sighed and closed his eyes.

“Tomorrow, Lan Zhan. I’ll answer your questions tomorrow.”

Because of course there would be questions. And now he understood why Lan Wangji had been keeping his vigil by Wei Wuxian’s bed. He should be used to people distrusting him, belonging to no clan or sect as he did. It happened more frequently than not, but being distrusted by *Lan Zhan* made him wish he’d stayed unconscious longer.

Any time a rogue cultivator did something unexpected, especially if it showed a significant degree of skill or power, there were concerns raised about whether said cultivator was ‘dangerous’. Wei Wuxian thought about the stone he still carried in his pouch, and the odd resonance he had felt when he was near the creature.

The truth was, there *were* still unresolved dangers and unanswered questions. If he were in Lan Zhani’s shoes, he’d want to know, too. Especially if the clan symbols were still visible on the creature when Lan Zhan had arrived. Maybe Lan Wangji thought Wei Wuxian had put them there?

He had planned on waiting until he heard Lan Wangji leave so that he could ask Wen Qing more questions about exactly where they were being held and on whose authority had they been brought to GusuLan, but his mind seemed to blur almost as soon as his eyes had closed. He was asleep before Lan Wangji reached the door.

Mid-morning light was streaming through the window the next time Wei Wuxian opened his eyes. He felt a warm presence next to him in the bed, and turned to see the top of A-Yuan’s head nestled into the side of his chest. Evidently, Wen Qing had not lied about A-Yuan wanting to come see him first thing in the morning. Wei Wuxian had just slept through it.

It appeared that the two of them were alone, at least for the moment.

Wei Wuxian turned his head to breathe in the soft, gentle scent of the child. As much as he regretted not being able to save the village, he was infinitely grateful that at least this small child had been saved. If his hand shook as he reached up to gently run it through A-Yuan's hair, then at least no one was there to witness it.

It was strange how adrenaline can drown out fear. When he faced the *Xiangliu* , it wasn't as though he *wasn't* afraid. That would have been stupid, and Wei Wuxian was many things, but stupid wasn't one of them. But there really hadn't been time for him to focus on that because most of his attention had been needed to stay alive and figure out a way to deal enough damage to the big-ass demon snake to keep A-Yuan and Wen Ning safe.

Now that the battle was far behind him, his mind had the time to replay each moment, each facet of the battle in horrifying clarity. He drew a shaky breath, drawing A-Yuan closer. A-Yuan was alive, and the terrifying faces on the *Xiangliu* 's nine heads were all staring sightlessly at the sky now. The downside of having a relentlessly active mind was that he could now imagine, with ruthless clarity, all the ways in which the battle could have… *should* have... ended in his death. And likely the deaths of Wen Ning, A-Yuan, and Wen Qing.

The only thing Wei Wuxian had ever found that could shut his restless mind up was copious amounts of alcohol. Unfortunately, alcohol was one of the many (thousands of) things that were forbidden in Cloud Recesses, and he wasn't yet strong enough to make it into town on his own. He hadn't been lying when he said that Lan Zhan had always been better at meditation than him. It was hard for any part of Wei Wuxian to be quiet for long: mind, body or spirit.

The sound of voices floating through his window from somewhere outside distracted him from his thoughts. They were young, and full of energy (for Lan disciples, which meant speaking in controlled voices but with a thread of excitement that had not yet been fully disciplined out of them, yet). By the sounds of the snippets of conversation that washed over him, the children were walking from the library to the training fields to continue their daily lessons.

Wei Wuxian recalled the overall layout of Cloud Recesses, and determined he must be in one of the small guest houses on the edge of the compound usually reserved for guest lecturers who were not too high up in the sect hierarchy but were above being put in the dormitories with the rest of the students.

Wei Wuxian didn't really pay attention to the children's words, just letting the sound of their chatter flow over him, a soothing sound of life and peace and normalcy that had not been touched by huge monsters spewing poison and drowning innocents.

One thread of conversation abruptly caught his attention.

"*We will be the first clan to have one of its leaders reach immortal status now that Hanguang Jun has finally agreed to take a cultivation partner."*

"You can't prove someone is really immortal. Just that their aging has slowed."

"Hanguang Jun's golden core is so pure and strong he almost doesn't need a cultivation partner."

"Then why have the elders been trying to get him and Zewu Jun to take one for years?"

"Did they announce who it would be?"

"No gossiping in the Cloud Recesses."

"I don't think he's chosen one yet."

"Do you think he already has someone in mind?"

"NO GOSSIPING IN CLOUD RECESSES!"

"No shouting in Cloud Recesses."

The voices drifted away, but their words echoed in Wei Wuxian's ears. Cultivators with strong golden cores definitely received the benefits of slowed aging, assuming they weren't killed in battle in their youth. While this naturally led to the notion of achieving immortality, this almost never actually happened.

There were legends, of course. One or two of those legends were likely true, or close enough that it didn't matter. Baoshan Sanren, who was the mentor of Wei Wuxian's own mother, was one rumored to have achieved this status. But she did so through total isolation from the stresses of the world, and through techniques that were not known outside her mountain.

A strong core alone was not sufficient to achieve immortality, or there would be many more immortals running around the clans. The practice of taking a cultivation partner was claimed to increase the strength of one's golden core significantly, if the partner was also strong in will and spiritual power, though Wei Wuxian had never given much thought as to whether or why it might be true. But those blessed with powerful golden cores were also cursed with the heavy toll that wielding such power put on their minds and personas.

Qi deviation was an extreme expression of this strain (which happened so frequently that there were entire branches of meditation and music therapy to help mitigate or prevent it). Even without that extreme risk, those in possession of the strongest golden cores tended to be unable to form the type of deep, long-term attachment required for successful cultivation partnerships. All that power that they had to constantly control and refine often made tempers shorten and arrogance grow. Not great foundations for deep, intimate partnerships.

Wei Wuxian hadn't seen it accomplished even once.

Madam Yu and Jiang Fengman were possibly the closest he'd seen, because at least they had stayed married to each other and faithful. But their volatile personalities caused them to constantly clash. According to the talk at Lotus Piers (where gossiping was definitely not forbidden), they hadn't shared a bedroom since Jiang Cheng's birth.

The news that Lan Wangji had supposedly agreed to seek out a cultivation partner sat like nettles on Wei Wuxian's skin. Lan Zhan didn't even like *talking* to people! Had he been forced into it? Was he doing it just for the prestige of the GusuLan sect?

Did he have someone already in mind?

Wei Wuxian wasn't sure why that thought was somehow more disturbing to his psyche than the vivid memory of the nine faces of the *Xiangliu* as it tried (and very nearly succeeded) to kill him.

A-Yuan shifted beside him, snuffling slightly before opening his eyes and blinking up at him.

“Xian-gege is… okay now?” A-Yuan asked. The uncertainty in the voice of the usually bold child pulled at Wei Wuxian’s heart. A-Yuan had lost his parents to a raid on the village shortly after he was born, but the village had taken on raising the child as sort of a group project.

And he had witnessed them all being washed away in an instant.

“Yeah. Yes, A-Yuan, your Xian-gege is fine. Just over-tired, you know?”

A-Yuan’s eyes filled with tears as he hugged Wei Wuxian tight. “I wanted to come for *days* and they wouldn’t let me see you. I didn’t know if you were… if you were… there was so much lightning and it was so *loud* . And the snake was so *big* . Then Uncle Rich came and he broughted you back but you were so still and quiet. Xian-gege is never still and quiet. I didn’t want Xian-gege to be gone, too.”

Wei Wuxian felt his eyes burn. It was a long time since he’d thought there would be anyone who would grieve for him if he died, but he knew the fear and grief of being left alone in a frightening world at A-Yuan’s age. He was suddenly intensely grateful that he had survived his battle with *Xiangliu* , to be here to comfort A-Yuan in a way that he had not been comforted when he was a child, alone and afraid. He wondered if A-Yuan would grow up to fear snakes the way Wei Wuxian feared dogs. He hoped not.

“I’m fine. I’m here. It’s ok, A-Yuan. You’re safe. Wen Ning, Wen Qing and I will take care of you.” Wei Wuxian said the words he had longed to hear as a child, feeling something shift and solidify within him. He had been drifting without much focus since leaving Lotus Piers.

He had a purpose now. He would protect A-Yuan, Wen Ning and Wen Qing. He could make sure A-Yuan was never left alone to fend for himself. It would not be easy, as he had no sect or even a clan to call home. But he had three people now for whom he would apply all of his not inconsiderable cultivation skills to ensure they were safe.

A-Yuan and Wei Wuxian rested together on the bed, both seeming to take comfort in the other’s warmth, as though proof of life to the other. Wen Ning and Wen Qing came in not too long after A-Yuan had woken up to check on them. Wen Ning looked pale and tired, but expressed relief at finding Wei Wuxian awake. Wei Wuxian’s attempts to apologize for not arriving sooner were met only with confusion and urgent rebuttals from Wen Ning, but soon the young man tired and had to return to his bed, which Wei Wuxian found out was in the same guest house.

“A-Ning has never had a strong constitution,” Wen Qing said, noting Wei Wuxian’s concerned expression. “The poison is out of his system, but it will take some time for his body to fully recover.”

Wei Wuxian nodded. It was no wonder Wen Qing was so protective of her little brother. The youth had decent (though not exceptional) cultivation skills, but with a weak physical constitution, it would be dangerous for him to practice them on night hunts. Even medical practices often drew on both the physical strength of the healer, as well as on their spiritual powers. Wen Ning would be at risk no matter how he practiced his cultivation. But there were more pressing concerns at the moment.

“It’s just the four of us here right now?” Wei Wuxian quietly asked Wen Qing, after her brother had departed to find his own bed. Rather than replying immediately, she turned her attention to A-Yuan.

“A-Yuan, Wei Wuxian needs his rest also. Why don’t you go make sure A-Ning isn’t lonely. Once he is resting, you can play with the puzzle that Lan Wangji left for you,” Wen Qing said, her tone gentle with the child that she never used on adults. A-Yuan gave a concerned look towards Wei Wuxian.

“I’m fine. Wen Qing is going to check me over to make sure, and probably make me drink more of her gross medicine.” Wei Wuxian delighted in the dry look Wen Qing gave him at his comment. “But I’ll try to see if there is something fun we can do after lunch.” He wasn’t entirely sure that there was a single fun thing that wasn’t against the rules in Cloud Recesses, but if there was, he would find it for him and A-Yuan to do.

“Ok!” A-Yuan said, cheerfully. He slid off the bed to follow after wherever Wen Ning had disappeared to.

“For right now, it is just the four of us. But Lan Wangji has been spending most of his time here, and will be returning with Sect Leader Lan soon,” Wen Qing replied quietly, glancing towards the window. They both were careful to keep their voices low enough to not travel.

“Why are we all the way in Cloud Recesses?” Wei Wuxian asked the question that had been worrying away at the back of his mind ever since he had seen the dark symbols on *Xiangliu* , then woken up in GusuLan territory.

Wen Qing frowned at the tone of his question. “The water near the village was all poisoned. The battle was loud enough that it was seen and heard for miles. Someone would be coming to investigate.”

Wei Wuxian huffed out a short breath, though he did get an internal smirk that his battle with the *Xiangliu* . “Yeah, I get that. We had to get out of there. But there are other villages a lot closer than going all the way to Cloud Recesses.”

“Lan Wangji picked you up and said he was taking you here. I could either follow or not.”

Wei Wuxian forced himself to not imagine Lan Wangji *picking him up* and *carrying him* to Cloud Recesses. It was mortifying and about six other things that Wei Wuxian didn’t know how to identify at the moment. But it was also concerning.

“We’re not in the infirmary. We’re hidden away in some guest house.”

Wen Qing looked at him quietly for a moment. “Lan Wangji thought it best, and Lan Xichen agreed given the political tensions with the Wen and the other sects. I already had the antidote, and the clan doctors here would not.”

“So they brought us all the way here, but then didn’t let any of their own doctors see us because… what? You are a much better doctor than anyone here?” Wei Wuxian asked, his voice taking a hard edge. “I mean, you obviously *are* , you’re the best doctor anywhere. But I doubt Zewu Jun knew that, and even if he did, I can’t see the head of the GusuLan sect making that statement so clearly to his own top doctors.”

Wen Qing nodded slowly, clearly having wondered the same thing herself. “The GusuLan doctors might not surpass me, but they are competent.” She observed him for a moment. “You suspect something.”

“The creature didn’t appear by chance,” Wei Wuxian said, his voice going so quiet that Wen Qing had to lean forward and even then could only barely make out his words.

Her eyes widened, but she matched his tone in volume. “You think it was controlled by the Lans?”

“I don’t know. There were three sect symbols on the creature. The GusuLan symbol was one of them.”

“And the other two?”

“Qishan Wen and Yunmeng Jiang.”

Wen Qing drummed her fingers silently on her thigh. “Those three would never work together.”

“No. The Lans and Jiangs wouldn’t go to war against each other, either,” Wei Wuxian agreed. “The creature was either summoned by Qishan Wen to attack the other two, or vice versa. But it was found near Wen territory.”

“Wen Ruohan would have had no issue practicing on his own people. My branch of the clan had not supported him. It could still be either way,” she said thoughtfully. “So we either need to warn Zewu Jun that his clan is being targeted…,” she began, and Wei Wuxian finished her thought.

“... or we need to get out of here as soon as possible because we messed up their attack and they know it, but maybe just brought us here to see what we knew and if we told anyone else.”

Before they could continue their conversation, the door to the house opened and Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji entered, their pristine robes flowing gracefully around them as they moved.

“Young Master Wei,” Lan Xichen said, gently. Wei Wuxian studied him, but could only read kindness and sincerity in his demeanor. “It is good to see you improved.”

To be continued…

Chapter 4: The word spreads

Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji entered, their pristine robes flowing gracefully around them as they moved.

"Young master Wei," Lan Xichen said, gently. Wei Wuxian studied him, but could only read kindness and sincerity in his demeanor. "It is good to see you improved."

"Wen daifu, your skill as a healer is truly remarkable," Lan Xichen bowed politely to her in greeting as well. Lan Wangji replicated the bow, but remained impassively silent.

"Thank, Sect leader Lan, young master Lan," Wen Qin returned politely to both, though her tone was not deferential.

"Yes, thank you, Sect Leader Lan." Wei Wuxian wasn't quite sure how to play this. Lan Xichen might not know how Wei Wuxian pumped people for information while hiding behind a vacuous smile, but Lan Zhan had seen it and was unlikely to fall for it. A direct approach was great when Wei Wuxian could fight himself out of a bad situation if it went sideways, but that wasn't possible at the moment, either.

"I appreciate you allowing Wen Qing to care for me and Wen Ning here," Wei Wuxan said formally, though he allowed a slightly questioning tone to creep in at the end.

Lan Xichen gave a slight side-eye to Lan Wangji (who ignored him entirely) before responding. "Wangji seemed to feel that Cloud Recesses was the best place for your care, given the grave injuries you had suffered."

Wei Wuxian was trying hard to read any subtext to the statement, but all he got from Lan Xichen was a vague sense of amusement. Lan Zhan's ears went slightly pink (probably from annoyance at Wei Wuxian's question), but there was still no sign of wariness or hostility from either man. Rather than asking directly why none of the doctors from Cloud Recesses had been in to see him if this place was so great for healing, he decided to be cautious. For once. It wasn't just *his* safety at risk with Wen Qing, Wen Ning, and A-Yuan here with him.

"Lan Zhan said you wanted to speak with me, Sect Leader?" Wei Wuxian asked, putting on a friendly, disarming grin. Lan Wangji's eyes narrowed fractionally, but Wei Wuxian kept his gaze locked on Lan Xichen

Lan Xichen inclined his head slightly, his face turning serious. "Yes. I wanted to understand how you came across the *Xiangliu* . We'd heard no rumors of such a creature being on the loose. Had junior cultivators responded to any such concerns, they would not have survived. Its abrupt appearance is… concerning."

Lan Xichen seemed completely sincere in his concern, and - while Wei Wuxian would admit that the Twin Jades were both known for having 'thick faces' that hid their emotions - Wei Wuxian would bet his life that neither of them would deceive him in this way, treating him as a guest if he were, in fact, a prisoner.

Wei Wuxian would bet his *own* life, but not the lives of others. There was still a chance that Lan Qiren or one of the other elders were behind this, and Wei Wuxian had nowhere near the confidence in their morals or ethics that he did in those of Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji.

"Of course, Sect Leader," Wei Wuxian turned towards Wen Qing. It was odd to see her dressed in white, rather than her usual red robes. But all of her worldly possessions were at the bottom of a toxic swamp, and the robes she had been wearing had likely been ruined when she was tending to Wen Ning. The fact that all of the Wen were currently dressed in Gusu white would be helpful. "Wen Qing, as we were just discussing, I fully agree that it would do Wen Ning and A-Yuan some good to get some fresh air. I'm sure I'll be fine with the esteemed companionship of Sect Leader Lan and Hanguang-Jun while you take them out. Please don't delay on my account."

They were housed on the edge of Cloud Recesses, and most of the disciples had returned to their dormitories for studying and to wash before dinner. It was unlikely that the Wen would be seen leaving. Wen Qing looked like she was seriously considering stabbing Wei Wuxian directly through the ribs she'd just healed for him, but after a frozen moment, she nodded and stood.

"As you said, Wei Wuxian," she replied tightly. She might not like it, but she would protect Wen Ning and A-Yuan at all costs. It was one of the few things that Wei Wuxian and her agreed completely on. Getting Wen Ning and A-Yuan out of the immediate line of sight of anyone in the Lan sect was likely unnecessary, but neither she nor Wei Wuxian had a particularly good history with sects behaving fairly or honorably.

The Lan brothers nodded to her as she took her leave. He might have imagined it, but he thought he saw something flicker in Lan Wangji's eyes.

"It was really just a fluke," Wei Wuxian began as he heard Wen Qing gathering Wen Ning and A-Yuan to leave. She would take them somewhere that would be in casual reach of Cloud Recesses, but far enough away that they would have some warning if things were not safe here. "I had been in the area helping out a farmer with a simple haunting. When I stopped in the village to see if there was any other work available. I made friends with several of the villagers." Wei Wuxian felt a wave of grief at the thought of Granny Wen, Uncle 4 and Uncle 6. They had been warm and kind to him.

And he hadn't been able to save them.

"Wei Ying."

Wei Wuxian realized that he'd closed his eyes, and opened them to see both brothers looking at him with concern. Lan Wangji had been the one who had spoken, his voice completely inflectionless, but it still somehow made Wei Wuxian flinch. He had never been able to deal with sympathy, much less pity, so he forced a grin on his face.

"Ah, Lan Zhan. I haven't fallen asleep, no need to scold me." Wei Wuxian ignored the tiny line that appeared between Lan Wangji's brows, not sure what to make of it. "Anyway, I started visiting the village any time I was nearby. On my last visit, Wen Ning and A-Yuan told me about a small, toxic bog that appeared suddenly near their village. They showed it to me and it was like nothing that I'd ever seen before."

“So you came here and researched it until you found out what could cause it,” Lan Xichen said.

“Took too long, though,” Wei Wuxian breathed out bitterly.

“Faster than others,” Lan Wangji stated flatly.

“What?” Wei Wuxian asked, startled.

Lan Wangji didn’t bother repeating himself, but frowned intently at Wei Wuxian.

“You shouldn’t blame yourself, Young Master Wei,” Lan Xichen spoke. “The *Xiangliu* hasn’t been seen in over two hundred years. There was no reason for you or anyone else to have been able to predict it would suddenly make a return.”

There it was. The opening Wei Wuxian needed to bring up the strange markings. If his instincts were right, the GusuLan clan was at risk of being attacked, and he needed to warn them. Wen Qing would have gotten the others to safety by now in case his instincts were wrong.

“I think someone did more than just predict it,” Wei Wuxian stated boldly, looking first Lan Xichen then Lan Wangji in the eye.

“Explain,” Lan Wangji replied.

“Do you have paper and ink?” Wei Wuxian asked instead.

Lan Xichen hesitated, then went to a desk in the corner of the room and procured the requested items, setting them on a small tray that had held some broth earlier, the dishes long since returned to the kitchen.

Wei Wuxian, murmured his thanks and quickly sketched out a series of three made-up symbols to replace the actual clan symbols. If this was something that was done without Lan Xichen or Lan Wangji’s knowledge, Wei Wuxian didn’t want to bias their evaluation of the markings he’d seen. He was careful to orient the fake clan symbols in the same way they had been on the *Xiangliu,* and connected them with the same characters. It took several minutes, as the details of the thickness and spacing between them were important.

When he finished, Wei Wuxian turned the page around to face the two who had been watching him, studying their expression for any sign of recognition or duplicity.

“What would you say is the dynamic between these three symbols, when they’re written like this?”

Both brothers looked at the drawing, then exchanged an unreadable look with each other.

“There aren’t many reasons you would draw something like this in relation to our conversation concerning the *Xiangliu,* ” Lan Xichen stated. “Where did you see these drawn?”

Wei Wuxian didn’t answer immediately, looking over to Lan Wangji instead. “Did you feel them, Lan Zhan? Were they still visible when you got there?”

“No. What did you feel?” Lan Wangji asked, frowning slightly.

Wei Wuxian tilted his head to the side, considering how much to share. He needed to warn them about the seals, but he didn't need to screw himself over by explaining how he sensed them. The last time he'd even mentioned the *idea* of interacting with resentful energy, he'd been expelled from Cloud Recesses. Now he was actually doing it.

"Yeah. There was a… weird energy. But you guys didn't answer my first question. What would this configuration mean?"

Despite the fact that Lan Wangji's face didn't even twitch, Wei Wuxian knew that he wasn't pleased with Wei Wuxian's non-answer. But Lan Xichen replied.

"The symbol you've drawn on the top is linked to this character for ownership, and the one for command. The two that are smaller and below it aren't marked in the same way. The characters you've drawn surrounding the smaller symbols aren't ones I'm familiar with exactly, but they are similar to some I've seen that are used to link subjects to spirit trap arrays."

Wei Wuxian frowned. Each sect had their own secrets on talismans and arrays, and they tended not to share the information with outsiders. This had been a source of frustration for Wei Wuxian in many instances in the past, but never as much as this particular moment. Everything hinged on what these symbols meant. An act of war had been taken, but he could not prove who started it if he didn't understand how the symbols interacted and what they meant.

"A summoning array? Hm," Wei Wuxian said, looking back down at the paper. "I wasn't sure if the top symbol was the one who was being controlled or doing the controlling, but if the others are linked to arrays to draw the creature to them, then…," Wei Wuxian started thinking through the possibilities. Where would these arrays be best placed? Could they be used for other creatures or were they specific to just the *Xiangliu* ?

"Are you going to show us the uncensored version of what you actually saw now?" Lan Xichen prompted gently, drawing Wei Wuxian back from his thoughts. "I'd hate to have Wen Ning walking for too long before you determine it's safe enough to call them back. He's still quite weak."

Wei Wuxian flushed at the gentle reprimand, his gaze met with only a small smile.

"Aiyah. I guess I wasn't very subtle," Wei Wuxian admitted sheepishly. He wished he wasn't so tired. He didn't think as well when he was exhausted. But there wasn't time to dance around it anymore.

"Mn," Lan Wangji replied, his tone flat but somehow still conveying a sense of censure.

"Hey! Look, I just… I wasn't sure. I mean, I was pretty sure that neither of *you* would do it. But some of your elders are… more about punishment than peace, you know?"

Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji didn't respond, but they also didn't disagree. Lan Xichen handed Wei Wuxian a clean sheet of paper, the request clear.

"Yeah, ok, ok. It was…," Wei Wuxian concentrated on getting each stroke as closely replicating what he'd seen on the creature as possible. The tip of his tongue rested on his lower lip as he finished.

“There. I was pretty busy trying not to die at the time I saw it, but I think this is mostly right.” He looked up to find Lan Wangji’s golden eyes locked on him, while his brother was focused on the paper.

“You’re saying that the *Xiangliu* was summoned,” Lan Xichen said. He lifted his gaze to meet Wei Wuxian’s.

“I’m just showing you what I saw. These were marked at the base of the *Xiangliu* just below where the necks branched out.”

There was a brief silence in the room as his words were absorbed. He was somewhat surprised (and relieved) that neither man seemed to doubt him. Perhaps even his far-fetched explanation was easier to believe than a legendary monster returning after centuries just for the hell of it.

“But the village that was attacked was a branch of the Wen clan,” Lan Xichen countered.

“Yeah. That’s why I wasn’t sure…,” Wei Wuxian trailed off as two sets of intelligent eyes bore into him, clearly aware of exactly what Wei Wuxian was implying. “Look! I’m not saying you two. I just…,” he huffed out a breath. “But yeah. I wasn’t sure, especially since it was a Wen village that had been attacked. I asked Wen Qing about it, and she told me that the branch of the Wen clan that lived in that village was one that had broken away from Wen Ruohan. They were mostly non-cultivators, but the ones who practiced cultivation were healers, not soldiers.” Wei Wuxian felt his insides twisting as his throat tightened. “They were innocent . ”

Wei Wuxian drew a deep breath to try to loosen the knot of anger and grief that had lodged in his throat. The Qishan Wen sect had done this… they had done this just for *practice* …

There was a rapid knocking on the door, and all three men tensed.

“Zewu-Jun?” a young, perfectly polite voice came from the other side of the door. Lan Xichen frowned, but stepped around the privacy screen to go and speak to whomever it was that had come to find him.

Wei Wuxian had no difficulty hearing their voices when the door opened.

“Zewu-Jun. Please excuse this one’s intrusion. I know you asked not to be disturbed, but Master Qiren said to go and find you. There is an emissary from the Qishan Wen sect here on urgent business.”

Wei Wuxian’s eyes locked on Lan Wangji’s, but the stoic man’s expression didn’t change.

“Thank you for delivering the message. Please let Uncle know that I will be there shortly,” Lan Xichen replied calmly.

The messenger took their leave, and Lan Xichen closed the door behind him before returning to Wei Wuxian.

“You heard,” Lan Xichen said simply. “I will find out what they want.”

“You won’t tell them we know about the seals,” Wei Wuxian stated, though it was really a question.

"No. No one besides Wangji and I know that you are here. It is probably best if we keep it that way for the time being. Wen Ruohan likely spent a great deal of effort summoning the *Xiangliu.* He will be displeased at whomever it was who destroyed it before it could do his bidding. Please continue the discussion without me." He turned to look at Lan Wangji. "Wangji, please fill me in after I have met with the Qishan Wen emissary."

With that, Lan Xichen departed, leaving Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian alone in the small cottage.

Wei Wuxian tried to control the thousands of possibilities racing through his head regarding what the Wen emissary showing up here could mean. Did they know he was here? Did they know Wen Qing and Wen Ning had survived? A-Yuan was likely too young to have been of note to them, but Wen Qing had already gotten their attention with her medical skills. Would they take them back? Were they here to attack? Did they know Lan Zhan had helped? Wei Wuxian was still days away from having his strength back. He could not defend himself nor protect his friends. What if -

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji's calm voice cut through his racing thoughts.

Wei Wuxian looked at him, searching his face for *anything* that he could trust. That he could know for sure would protect his friends. Lan Zhan might be rigid and inflexible and in love with rules but one thing Wei Wuxian was certain of was that Lan Zhan would not lie to him.

"Lan Zhan. Lan Zhan, you can't let them take Wen Qing or Wen Ning. They'll execute them. Please. I know you don't really like me but they haven't done anything wrong. Give me your word -"

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji cut him off (which was possibly the first time Wei Wuxian had ever heard Lan Wangji interrupt someone, as it violated one of the many, many rules of the sect). The shock of the interruption alone snapped Wei Wuxian somewhat out of the dizzying spiral of panic-ridden thoughts and worst-case scenarios.

"You broke a rule, Lan Zhan. You're so lucky that I have to hide here in bed or I'd have to report you to your uncle." Wei Wuxian didn't quite have the energy to muster the mocking laugh he usually used as a shield when he was feeling overwhelmed, but at least he no longer felt like hyperventilating.

Lan Wangji ignored Wei Wuxian's rambling and stayed on point. "I will protect Wei Ying. And his friends."

From anyone else, the statement would have been mocking, or arrogant, or… or… something. From Lan Wangji it just seemed a simple statement of truth, and Wei Wuxian didn't know what to do with that. Not even his own clan had stood up for him. Not even his own adoptive brother.

"Why? I mean… the Wen are clearly considering war with your sect. If they find out you're harboring us, it will provoke them."

"Do not fear the strong. Protect the innocent," Lan Wangji quoted at Wei Wuxian.

Of course. The rules. Lan Wangji is nothing if not predictable in that sense. He has earned his title of Hanguang-Jun. Wei Wuxian has no idea why the answer disappointed him, so he shoves

it aside and instead rolls his eyes. “Lan Zhan. So many rules and you always follow each and every one. How exhausting it must be!”

Lan Wangji’s expression flickered minutely, but Wei Wuxian didn’t know how to read it.

“I can take care of myself. But I can’t protect the Wens right now, especially A-Yuan. I don’t have a place for them to stay yet. I’ll figure something out, but if Wen Ruohan is looking for me, then I will only put them at risk being near them. You will keep them safe?”

“Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji began, frowning as though he wanted to argue something, but this time it was Wei Wuxian who cut him off.

“You said you would keep my friends safe. I am asking for your word, Lan Zhan. I will pay you back, somehow, I swear it.”

“There is no need for you to pay me back. You have already prevented the *Xiangliu* from attacking Cloud Recesses,” Lan Wangji said tersely, though he didn’t seem happy about it.

It was likely annoying for someone as illustrious as Lan Wangji to be indebted to a nobody rogue cultivator like Wei Wuxian. But Wei Wuxian would take it. Whatever the reason was that Lan Wangji was willing to commit to this, Wei Wuxian knew he could trust him to follow through. That was more than he could say for just about anyone else he’d met in his life.

“Thank you, Lan Zhan.”

Lan Wangji drew a breath to respond when the door opened. Lan Xichen appeared, his face grim.

“I cannot stay long. I sent the delegation to set their belongings in their rooms and refresh themselves, but I will be expected back momentarily. Wei Wuxian, you need to call your friends back. They are not safe at the moment in Cloud Recesses.”

Wei Wuxian’s hand lifted, and *Suibian* flew to it. He was in no condition to fight, but the action had been instinctive. “What did the emissary want?”

Lan Xichen eyed the sword momentarily, but answered quickly. “Officially, they are here to pay their respects to Wangji, having heard he is seeking a cultivation partner.”

Wei Wuxian couldn’t help his eyes from flickering to Lan Wangji’s face, but the man had no reaction to the statement whatsoever.

“I’m guessing it wasn’t their desire to ‘cultivate’ with Lan Zhan that got you upset,” Wei Wuxian stated, still not putting *Suibian* down. He knew he was being rude, but his emotions were running high and he had never been good at handling it when that happened.

“No. They mentioned almost immediately that there had been a dangerous attack on one of their villages.”

Wei Wuxian snorted at that. Wen Ruohan didn’t claim the village and had never offered the villagers his protection. He’d used them for his experiment and left them to die, now he dares to

claim insult that they were attacked?

“Indeed,” Lan Xichen said, reading Wei Wuxian’s expression. “They said that there had been rumors of a rogue cultivator in the area, and implied that he was behind the creature’s appearance and attack on their lands. They are asking all the sects to be on the look-out for him. They are also wanting information on any survivors, though they didn’t appear to be hopeful that there were any.”

That had Wei Wuxian breathing a sigh of relief. If his friends could stay hidden, they would be presumed dead and Wen Ruohan would not hunt them. But that plan would be over before it even began if they were seen by any of the Wen delegation. “Wen Ning and A-Yuan will not be recognized, but Wen Qing is too well known. Even in her white robes, if they see her face, they will know her.”

Lan Xichen nodded, clearly having realized the same thing, hence his emergency visit to Wei Wuxian. Wei Wuxian quickly sent out a butterfly to call them back, but to be cautious. Hopefully the delegation would not stay long.

“So it’s mainly just me that they’re looking for,” Wei Wuxian said. “Do they know it’s me? Did they have my name?”

Lan Xichen hesitated. “They didn’t reveal your name, but they did have a description of you. Uncle recognized it as you, and told them as much before I arrived.”

“*Fuck* ,” Wei Wuxian muttered. He thought he detected a movement from Lan Wangji, but when he looked at the man he appeared as still as ever. Of course Lan Qiren would have to have been the ones they talked to. He was sure that the elder had told the Wen plenty of concerning things about Wei Wuxian, and by Lan Xichen’s expression, he was likely right.

“Their next stop will be Lotus Pier.” Lan Xichen could not know how his words twisted inside Wei Wuxian. How the thought of what Madam Yu would say about him, how she would cast him in a dangerous light and feed the rumors that Wei Wuxian might have actually been the one behind the creature’s attack that the Wen were trying to spread. He had hoped leaving the clan would keep him out of Madam Yu’s line of fire, but that plan was about to fail spectacularly.

He wondered when he would ever get used to being alone, without family or clan to support him or believe him.

“I will protect Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji stated firmly. Wei Wuxian looked up, expecting to see Lan Wangji talking to his brother, but was surprised to find the unreadable, golden eyes fixed on himself instead.

“You promised me you’d protect my friends. I can look after myself,” Wei Wuxian insisted. He’d need probably another day before he could travel by sword, but he could at least make it out of Cloud Recesses and hide in the forest in the meantime.

“No,” Lan Wangji said, his micro-expression of annoyance deepening on his face.

“Lan Zhan. You are so good. But you can’t put your entire sect at risk. The Wen are planning war. They don’t need much provocation to attack.”

“They already planned to attack,” Lan Wangji stated as though that was the end of it. And perhaps, it was. Lan Wangji would never do something as dishonorable as sacrificing others to protect himself. Wei Wuxian didn’t really trust others, but somehow he knew this fact about Lan Zhan to be true in his bones.

“I can’t stay here. Lan Qiren has already told them about me. They know I visit here sometimes and have access to the library. It would make sense for them to look for me here.”

“Brother will not allow them to search Cloud Recesses.”

“They aren’t going to *ask* , Lan Zhan.” Wei Wuxian said exasperatedly, then turned to look beseechingly at Lan Xichen. Surely the sect leader would have more common sense. He was responsible for his clan’s safety, afterall. And unlike Wen Ruohan, Lan Xichen actually seemed to give a shit about his people.

But Lan Xichen was not looking at Wei Wuxian. He was watching Lan Wangji, his expression intent. Finally, he turned to meet Wei Wuxian’s gaze.

“Wangji is correct. They have already decided to attack Cloud Recesses. It was only your accidental discovery of the *Xiangliu* that prevented it from happening. We would have been completely caught off-guard. We now have time to prepare, and be more vigilant. The GusuLan sect is in your debt, Young Master Wei.” He bowed more formally.

“Mn,” Lan Wangji agreed.

Wei Wuxian looked away, feeling uncomfortable with their praise. Lan Zhan had been the one to kill the *Xiangliu* , not him.

“We don’t have proof, though. You didn’t see it, and I’m just a rogue cultivator,” Wei Wuxian said, latching on to a clear issue he could try to work on. “The clans won’t believe it without proof. We can try to warn Lotus Pier, but they won’t listen if the warning is based on just my word.”

Lan Wangji looked displeased at this. “Then you will show me.”

Wei Wuxian considered. The Wen had likely gone to remove any evidence of their tampering, but it was worth a try. Maybe they could find where the array had been placed, and see if they could find the arrays that the Wen may have placed near Cloud Recesses or Lotus Pier.

“I can’t take A-Yuan back there,” Wei Wuxian grimaced. “He shouldn’t have to see-”

“No,” Lan Wangji agreed firmly, interrupting yet again. Wei Wuxian wondered what was going on with Lan Wangji to make him break rules *multiple times* in a single day. Perhaps there was an exception to these rules when acts of war and safety of small children were being discussed.

Lan Xichen gave a sidelong gaze at his brother and smiled slightly. “A-Yuan will stay here with Wen daifu and Wen Ning. They will have my protection while you gather the evidence we need to take to the elders and to Lotus Pier. Now I must return before my absence is noted. Be careful, Wangji.”

Lan Wangji gave a slight nod to his brother, and Lan Xichen turned and headed towards the door, pausing just before he was fully out of view. "I assume you will not be open to Wen Chao's offer to be your cultivation partner."

Lan Wangji's face didn't seem to change, but Wei Wuxian could positively feel the expression of horror that was somehow clear on the perfect, emotionless features.

Lan Xichan chuckled. "I thought so. I will convey your regrets." He closed the door behind him.

Wen Qing returned shortly after Lan Xichen had left, directing an exhausted-looking Wen Ning to bed and telling A-Yuan to go keep him company before returning to Wei Wuxian. She looked down at the two versions of the seals that had been drawn, then at Lan Wangji.

"You know what these mean?" she asked him directly.

"Mn," Lan Wangji replied.

"If he showed them to you, then it must mean you were the target, not the attacker. I saw a Qishan Wen delegation arrive." Wen Qing gave Lan Wangji a piercing glare. "It would be dishonorable to turn Wei Wuxian over to them after he provided your sect with a warning of the attempted attack. After he killed the legendary monster that was going to be sent to attack you."

Wei Wuxian could not remember the last time anyone had defended him so fiercely. His JieJie had tried, though she did it more through calming words and earnest goodness, whereas Wen Qing was just straight up terrifying. He wondered, briefly, who would come out the winner between Madam Yu and Wen Qing in a battle of wills. His money was on Wen Qing, despite Madam Yu's formidable use of her husband's station.

"Actually, Lan Zhan was the one who killed it. In the end." Wei Wuxian raised his hands in supplication when Wen Qing turned her glare on him. "I'm just saying! They don't owe me."

"Shut up, Wei Wuxian. Idiots who nearly get themselves killed in six different ways all at once don't get to participate in grown-up conversations." She returned her glare to Lan Wangji, who appeared to be also slightly displeased by Wei Wuxian's words. "You are honor bound to protect Wei Wuxian. Your clan claims to strive for righteousness. If you give him up, you will go against every principal your sect claims to uphold."

Lan Wangji nodded in acknowledgement. "Mn."

Wen Qing blinked, apparently not expecting Lan Wangji to capitulate so quickly to her demand. Lan Wangji's eyes locked with Wen Qing's and for a moment the room felt as though it might combust. Finally, she gave a slight nod of her head. It was possibly one of the strangest moments in Wei Wuxian's life, because he felt like something significant had been communicated between the two of them concerning him, but he had no idea what it was.

"Very well. I will take Wen Ning and A-Yuan and keep them safe while you warn the clans," Wen Qing said briskly.

"Zewu-Jun has offered his personal protection to keep you three here," Wei Wuxian inserted, hoping to regain some sort of control over at least some part of this conversation. "He will keep

you hidden here. It's safer than pretty much anywhere else. They think everyone died from the village. The only one they're searching for is me."

Wen Qing rolled her eyes. "So of course, the first thing you're going to do is go back out there right under their noses and start stirring up trouble."

"Aiyah! Wen Qing, you wound me. I'm the picture of discretion and caution," he grinned. Wen Qing pulled out several needles and eyed him pointedly.

A-Yuan chose that moment to join them, evidently bored with watching Wen Ning sleep.

"Do I need to sedate you? Or can Hanguang-Jun keep you under control." She shifted her gaze to Lan Wangji, her face again taking on the same considering look that Wei Wuxian had not been able to read before.

"Mn," Lan Wangji said, meeting her gaze unflinchingly.

"I will keep Xian-gege safe," A-Yuan said proudly, clambering up on the bed next to Wei Wuxian. "He will listen to me." He turned to look at Wei Wuxian with all the seriousness a child of 5 or 6 could muster. "You must sleep when you're sick, Xian-gege. And always take the medicines that Auntie gives, even if they are gross."

Wen Qing sighed at Wei Wuxian's laughter. She returned the needles to her sleeve, much to Wei Wuxian's relief.

"Very well. I will brew some restorative tea for you both. I am assuming you are planning on leaving after nightfall to cover your exit. Wei Wuxian must sleep until then to restore enough strength to be able to travel."

Wei Wuxian would much rather leave immediately, preferably without dragging Lan Zhan into this mess, but the two sets of eyes pinning him to his bed made that seem highly unlikely.

"Fine. I'll drink your nasty-tasting tea, Wen Qing. You're such a bully to me! A-Yuan, you said you would protect me!"

Wei Wuxian felt some of the tension seep out of him at A-Yuan's giggles, and he reached over to tickle him. A-Yuan was alive, and Wei Wuxian would celebrate in that.

Wen Qing quickly masked the soft, indulgent look that had crept over her face and gave Wei Wuxian a short glare at the disrespect he showed her tea, but she moved quickly towards the brazier to begin its preparation. In truth, he was grateful and she knew it. He would have died without her remedies.

He only hoped he was not making a mistake leaving her here so close to their enemies. He was tired of always having to make choices, but almost always with no good options to choose from.

From his bedside, Lan Wangji watched Wei Wuxian play with A-Yuan, his face impassive as the tea steeped and they waited for nightfall.

To be continued…

I was hoping to find some images of the symbols but there wasn't anything that really matched what I had in mind and my calligraphy is really horrid so… you are all saved from my terrible graphics skills this week. Possibly next week I will have a better inspiration for visuals.

Also, this is probably clear but I guess I should add 'unreliable narrator' tag to this story? Wei Wuxian's mental gymnastics to explain why anyone might ever do anything nice for him are… impressive. LOL

Second Also! Does anyone have any good fic recs for modern Au D/s for these two? I am guessing there are a ton of them out there but I am pretty new to the fandom so I haven't found them yet.

Chapter 5: Hunting for proof

A/N - omg this fandom has so many super cute arranged marriage AUs why didn't anyone tell me this earlier???? I have been binge reading and am now at risk of getting fired please save me.

Wei Wuxian wasn't sure what woke him, or even when he'd fallen asleep. A-Yuan was curled into his side, breathing softly. Wei Wuxian took a moment to simply listen to the child breathe, the soft warmth of the child proof that A-Yuan was alive and safe. Wei Wuxian wished he didn't have to leave so soon. Memories flooded him of his own childhood after his parents deaths, the fear and loneliness, the uncertainty about what would happen to him. He didn't want A-Yuan to feel any of that, especially since he didn't know when he would be back. But Wen Qing and Wen Ning would be here, and they would keep A-Yuan safe. The child wouldn't have to fend for himself the way Wei Wuxian had. Lan Xichen had promised to protect them, and given that he had an entire clan behind him, his protection was worth more than Wei Wuxian's at the moment.

A movement across the room drew his attention. Lan Wangji's pristine white robes glowed in the moonlight as he approached Wei Wuxian's bed.

"It is after midnight. The Qishan Wen delegation is asleep," Lan Wangji stated.

Wei Wuxian nodded, gently extracting himself from the bed without waking A-Yuan. The little boy snuffled softly in his sleep, curling into the warmth of the blankets that Wei Wuxian settled around him.

"He will be safe," Lan Wangji said. Wei Wuxian breathed out slowly. That was not a guarantee that Lan Wangji could actually promise to keep, but he knew that the man would do his best. With war coming, there were no safe places and no guarantees for any of them. All they could do was try their best, and live with the consequences.

Lan Wangji handed Wei Wuxian a neatly folded pile of fabric. Wei Wuxian pulled the top layer off and realized that they were robes, matching the ones that had been destroyed in his battle with the *Xiangliu* . A red inner robe, and a black outer one. The fabric of the robes was of much higher quality than the originals that they were replacing. Wei Wuxian flushed with embarrassment when he realized he had no money to pay for robes like this.

"Thank you, Lan Zhan. I… I will have to pay you back later."

"Unnecessary," Lan Wangji said. "I will wait outside. Be quick."

Lan Wangji turned and walked to the door, one hand held formally behind his back, posture erect and perfect as always.

Wei Wuxian huffed as the door closed behind him. "Asshole can't just say 'you're welcome'."

Still, the robes were very fine as he pulled off the white under-robe he'd worn while bedridden and pulled on the red tunic and inner robe. The smooth fabric of it slid over his skin. There was some sort of embroidery along the trim, though it was on the inside of the fabric rather than facing outwards. He pulled it closer to the lamp, and realized that it was in the cloud pattern that Lan Wangji had on his head band.

The seamstress who made them must have thought they were for Lan Wangji, because Wei Wuxian was pretty sure he'd heard at one point that the pattern was only used for important people in the GusuLan sect, like blood relatives of the leader or something. There was even a length of red ribbon to tie his hair up, and it matched the rich fabric of the red inner robe. He quickly finished dressing and tied up his hair. There were black wrist wrappings, which he carefully wound around his forearms before grabbing *Suibian* and the pouch containing the stone from the sword he had found in the Slaughter Tortoise.

He brushed a kiss on A-Yuan's sleeping head, then headed towards the door. Wen Ning and Wen Qing were waiting for him.

"Wei-gongzi," Wen Ning said, bowing with earnest politeness. "Please be careful."

Wei Wuxian hugged him, then ruffled his hair. "Ah, Wen Ning! You don't have to worry about me. The snake's already dead. We're just going to go see if we can find out who summoned it. Zewu-Jun gave me his word that he would keep you guys hidden here. Just rest and get well."

Wen Ning seemed to only get more distressed by his words. "But Wei-gongzi needs rest more than I do. You were much more injured!"

"And your sister is an amazing doctor who healed me. Right, Wen Qing?" Wei Wuxian asked, batting his eyelashes at her. He knew he wasn't fully healed, but he also knew that Wen Qing wouldn't want her brother worrying.

"Wei Wuxian. Don't make me keep wasting my medical supplies by getting injured again," she said shortly. He thought about hugging her as he had hugged Wen Ning, but decided he preferred to continue breathing.

"Ah, Wen Qing. You know you'll miss me just as much as Wen Ning will!"

She gave him an annoyed look, then huffed out. "As you said. Now hurry up and don't keep Hanguang-Jun waiting."

Wei Wuxian froze, wondering if somehow he had misheard her, but she was already turning and walking over to where her bed was. Wen Ning was laughing, a hand over his mouth as he tried to keep his voice down so as to not wake up A-Yuan.

Wei Wuxian didn't know how to respond to any of it, so he just clapped Wen Ning on the shoulder one more time and headed out to join Lan Wangji.

Wei Wuxian stepped outside of the small cottage to find Lan Wangji standing perfectly still, one hand perfectly positioned behind his back as he looked up at the night sky. He could have been a statue, or a painting, for the air of ethereal perfection that he projected. It was times like this that it was hard to remember that the man was actually a deadly warrior. He seemed too pure for

battle, but theirs was not a world that allowed purity to go untainted. Lan Wangji turned at the sound of the door. His eyes met Wei Wuxian's, but his gaze then drifted quickly over the new robes Wei Wuxian was wearing. There was an intensity in the observation that unsettled Wei Wuxian somehow.

He felt himself fidgeting slightly, wondering if he had tied his robes crookedly in his hurry. Lan Wangji was always so immaculately dressed, his layered robes hanging without crease or wrinkle. Wei Wuxian was usually just short of looking actually disheveled. It didn't normally bother him, but he felt self conscious at the other man's silent, expressionless examination of him.

"We should leave quickly if we want to have any chance of still finding something near the village," Wei Wuxian said to break the odd tension of the moment, drawing *Suibian* . The Qishan Wen had already removed or concealed any evidence, but they wouldn't know for sure until they got there.

"Wei Ying will ride with me," Lan Wangji said, drawing *Bichen* and stepping closer to Wei Wuxian. Lan Wangji's fixed gaze hadn't moved from Wei Wuxian since he stepped outside, the odd tension somehow remaining despite Wei Wuxian trying to deflect whatever it was. It wasn't like he thought Lan Wangji would *attack* him or anything… they were on the same side. Still, his skin seemed to almost itch at the intensity that Lan Wangji was looking at him. He hadn't done anything wrong!

Wei Wuxian huffed. "I'm not an invalid. I can still ride my own sword."

"You are recovering. We do not know what we'll find when we get there."

Lan Wangji closed the distance, fluidly mounting *Bichen* . He turned to look down at Wei Wuxian, holding his hand out. Wei Wuxian looked at it for a moment. They really didn't have time to argue, with the Qishan Wen delegation visiting. They might be sleeping, but they could have sentries, and an argument out in the open could easily wake people up. They needed to leave unseen, over the walls rather than through the gates. Wei Wuxian considered mounting *Suibian* and darting off before Lan Wangji could do anything about it, but the fact was that he *was* still tired and pretty far from full strength.

It had nothing to do with the unyielding intensity in Lan Wangji's gaze as he looked down at him, his hand unwavering as it stretched out.

"Ugh. *Fine* . I haven't had to share a sword since I was a child, but whatever."

Wei Wuxian grabbed Lan Wangji's hand, noticing how much larger it was than his own, feeling the hardness of the calluses that Lan Wangji had built from years of wielding his sword. Lan Wangji's grip tightened, and Wei Wuxian found himself pulled up onto *Bichen* . The sword was long enough that they didn't have to stand pressed flush together, but they were definitely standing a lot closer than Lan Wangji tended to allow… pretty much anyone, ever.

"I carried Wei Ying to Cloud Recesses," Lan Wangji contradicted Wei Wuxian's earlier statement, his voice inflectionless but somehow still evoking an image in Wei Wuxian's mind of being held and carried by *Lan Wangji* for *hours* , while he was bloody and dirty and *unconscious*

getting stuff all over Lan Wangji's pristine robes which probably really annoyed the guy and… ugh.

Wei Wuxian didn't really know what to think about that so he decided not to.

At least there would be no holding and carrying this time. Wei Wuxian was perfectly capable of standing on his own two feet, than you very much. Since Lan Wangji was the one controlling *Bichen* 's speed and trajectory, he kept one hand resting lightly on Wei Wuxian's hip (seriously, how large were the guy's hands?), but only for balance.

The last person that Wei Wuxian had ridden tandem with (at least, while conscious) had been Jiang Fengmian, back when Wei Wuxian was still too young to be able to ride his own sword. Jiang Fengmian had held on tightly around Wei Wuxian's waist, but that was because Wei Wuxian had had even less self control back then than he did now (yes, it was possible), so it had been necessary. Madam Yu had *not* been pleased at the attention bestowed upon Wei Wuxian by the sect leader, but he had been thrilled to feel what it was like to fly above the ground like his adoptive uncle did.

There was a reason that riding tandem didn't happen very frequently, and usually only very briefly and for emergencies. It not only took a lot more spiritual power to lift and hold two people rather than just one, but it also required complete trust in the person you shared the sword with. You didn't even need to push the other person off. Just an unexpected change in direction would send the passenger falling to their death.

Wei Wuxian thought he should be much more embarrassed or uncomfortable with the situation than he actually was. Perhaps the battle with the Slaughter Tortoise had made him trust Lan Wangji, though - if pressed - Wei Wuxian would have said he trusted the man even before that, despite their primary interactions being Wei Wuxian breaking rules and Lan Wangji reporting him for it. Lang Wangji was just a solid, steady presence behind him. It was almost… comforting?

Whatever.

Once they were far enough away from Cloud Recesses that they didn't need to worry about staying silent, Lan Wangji still made no move to speak. They had several hours to pass before they arrived at their destination, and this endless silence would get boring quite quickly.

Wei Wuxian decided the best course of action would be to entertain himself by teasing Lan Wangji about this whole cultivation partner business.

"So, Wen Chao, eh, Lan Zhan?" Wei Wuxian taunted, throwing a wicked grin over his shoulder. "Aren't you sad to be leaving such a highly ranked potential suitor?"

"No," Lan Wangji said flatly, causing Wei Wuxian to snicker. Wei Wuxian hadn't had many run-ins with Wen Chao, but Wen Qing had very strong opinions about the useless, entitled second heir. Lan Wangji's disdain for the man did not surprise Wei Wuxian in the slightest.

It made teasing him extraordinarily entertaining.

"But he's second in line in the most powerful clan! Surely that gives him some standing in your consideration set despite his lack of, um… really anything else redeeming about him."

“No,” Lan Wangji said tightly. His voice might have sounded inflectionless to the casual listener, but Wei Wuxian could clearly hear the tone of horror and revulsion lacing through it. He laughed brightly.

“Ah, Lan Zhan. So difficult to please! Surely there is someone who will meet your exacting criteria.” Lan Wangji’s hand tightened fractionally around Wei Wuxian’s hip, and Wei Wuxian looked up, scanning their surroundings to see if there was a potential threat that had triggered Lan Wangji’s grasp. “Do you sense anything?”

“Mn,” Lan Wangji declined, his voice sounding… tense? Wei Wuxian wasn’t sure. Likely, he was still annoyed at Wei Wuxian’s running commentary about Lan Wangji’s personal business. But Wei Wuxian was nothing if not inappropriate, so he just laughed and continued his teasing.

“Poor Wen Chao. Not up to our illustrious Hanguang-Jun’s standards. If sect heir is not sufficient, what would satisfy Lan Zhan? Maybe nothing less than a full sect leader will do.”

“Ridiculous,” Lan Wangji stated. After that, no amount of teasing or taunting on the subject produced any response, so Wei Wuxian finally gave up. Perhaps Lan Wangji had only agreed to the idea of finding a cultivation partner to get Lan Qiren off his back. Though lying was forbidden, perhaps Lan Wangji had found a loophole in agreeing to the idea of a cultivation partner but with no timeline attached.

Somehow that idea seemed much more acceptable to Wei Wuxian than that Lan Wangji actually was going to choose one of his suitors to engage in dual cultivation with.

Wei Wuxian sighed, the night wind chilly against his exposed throat, but the robes Lan Wangji had given him kept the rest of him warm. Some strands of his hair had already fallen loose from their binding, and he pushed them out of his face. He wondered how Lan Wangji always managed to stay so tidy under the same breeze. He felt his mind wandering as the scenery flew past. Dawn was still several hours away, and - despite having slept the majority of the past few days away - he was already feeling weary.

Wei Wuxian wasn’t even the one using his spiritual energy to keep them moving, but just the act of standing when he’d been bedridden for days was feeling taxing on his body, though he would never admit it. His eyes drifted closed, and he forced them open, pinching his own thigh to wake himself back up. How lame would it be to survive a fight against a legendary monster that hadn’t been seen for centuries and then die by falling asleep while traveling and falling off a fucking sword.

He blew out an annoyed breath at himself and rolled his shoulders to try to get some blood circulating in his body again.

“Wei Ying?” Lan Wangji asked, his voice carrying a hint of concern. Lan Wangji’s grip on his hip tightened, and Wei Wuxian felt a flare of energy at the point of contact. Lan Wangji was passing him spiritual energy, while also flying them. That was… not actually that easy to do, and Wei Wuxian found himself as impressed as he was annoyed that Lan Wangji felt the need to do so.

“You don’t need to give me energy. I’m just bored,” Wei Wuxian lied easily. “You’re not doing a very good job of entertaining me, Lan Zhan!”

“Do you need to rest?” Lan Wangji persisted. The flow of energy to Wei Wuxian did not cut off, but he realized it was a losing battle to argue with Lan Wangji. Hopefully the man knew his own limits enough to not kill them both by multitasking like this.

“No. You’re doing all the work. Just… talk to me.”

“Talk,” Lan Wangji said sketpcially and… yeah. The man had a point. Conversation was not really Lan Wangji’s strength.

“Yes. Talk. Words coming out of your mouth. About… subjects.”

“Subjects.”

“Ugh, fine. Make me do all the work. Tell me about the *Xiangliu* . Why were you there? It’s not near Cloud Recesses.”

“Wei Ying said where he had been. The book you left was open to the *Xiangliu* .”

Wei Wuxian blinked. “Wait. What? Lan Zhan. You just… raced over there to see if I was fighting some giant, nine-headed snake out of *curiosity* ?”

Lan Wangji didn’t reply, and Wei Wuxian looked over his shoulder to try to read the man’s expression. Lan Wangji’s face was unreadable as ever.

“You make no sense. I’m sure that you had more important things to do for your clan than clean up after me. You’re the GusuLan’s Second Jade! You can’t run around doing irresponsible things like that.”

More silence.

“Ugh. You are the worst at this, Lan Zhan. You’re lucky you’re pretty.” Wei Wuxian threw another grin over his shoulder, but Lan Wangji’s face was as still as ever.

“This trip is going to take forever. Ok, so for some reason that you won’t explain, you decided to go all the way to Wen territory to satisfy your idle curiosity about a monster attacking nowhere near your clan’s lands. When you got there, what was happening? Was the *Xiangliu* still down, or was it back up spewing toxic water everywhere?”

“It was awake, but slowed.”

“Mm,” Wei Wuxian said, his finger rubbing the bridge of his nose as he tried to imagine how the second battle went down. “So how did you take care of the last four heads? Pretty sure I only took five out.”

“*Bichen.* ”

“What? *Bichen* could cut through the scales? Lan Zhan, that’s so unfair! I tried hacking it with *Suibian* and it didn’t even leave a scratch. How?”

Wei Wuxian wasn't arrogant about a lot of things, but he *was* at least a little bit arrogant about his swordsmanship. He'd fought both against and alongside Lan Wangji, and he could not understand how *Bichen* was able to pierce *Xiangliu* 's scales when *Suibian* could not. Just because Lan Wangji had named his sword something elegant like 'Dirt Eschewing' and Wei Wuxian had named his sword 'Whatever', didn't mean his sword wasn't just as good. Not everyone was fancy, but no one could say Wei Wuxian was not *effective.*

"Your lightning had ruptured the scales. I aimed for the fissures."

"Oh, oh. Yeah, that makes sense. Wow, for a minute there, I thought you had really out-classed me, Lan Zhan! How did you know that the ruptures were from lightning?"

Lan Wangji's face didn't change, but somehow Wei Wuxian knew he'd just been called a dumbass.

"What?! Lan Zhan, I just *asked* . I was sort of unconscious at the time, so you have to fill me in!"

"The lightning that was encircling it on the ground made it clear," Lan Wangji replied drily.

"What? The spell was still going? That's awesome! I wonder why, though. I thought it would only last a minute at most. How soon after I went down did you get there? Was it still going when you left?"

Wei Wuxian was speaking rapidly, his voice filled with excitement. He'd have to look at the exact characters he'd used in the talisman, because he hadn't intended for it to last that long, but the fact that it had was cool as *fuck* . It also explained why it had drained him almost completely, though.

He realized that Lan Wangji wasn't replying and, instead, was glaring at him.

"Lan Zhan! I didn't do anything! I just wanted to know how it worked."

"Wei Ying. Had you used that spell before?"

"Ah. Haha. Actually, no. I mean, I had been looking into it. Thinking about it. The book on fog, from your library, remember? I was just… it seemed like it might work. And it did! Isn't that awesome?!"

Lan Wangji only appeared more irritated. "You went to fight the *Xiangliu* of legend. Alone."

"Yeah, well… I mean… it's not like I had a lot of options for company. Not all of us have clans we belong to, and the village is not protected by any sect, so...," Wei Wuxian shrugged. "There wasn't really anyone I could ask for help, Lan Zhan."

Lan Wangji's jaw tensed, clearly disliking that answer. "Alone," Lan Wangji continued as if Wei Wuxian hadn't spoken. "... and with a talisman you'd never even tried before."

"It wasn't like the chain lightning thing was my plan A!" Wei Wuxian cried out with mock injury. He laughed at the slight twitch his words evoked on Lan Wangji's perfectly smooth face. It was practically a fit of rage. "But seriously, Lan Zhan. I tried other things first. Even freezing

it, to make it brittle. Nearly dislocated my shoulder with that one." Wei Wuxian rotated his shoulders, which were still honestly a bit sore from battle. "The lightning thing was like… plan K. Maybe. Or plan R. It was pretty far down the list."

Lan Wangji's general aura of being unimpressed with Wei Wuxian's lack of self-preservation didn't dissipate, but both cultivators abruptly stopped in their discussion as they saw movement and a flash of color up ahead. Lan Wangji gripped Wei Wuxian's hip tighter as he abruptly brought them lower to the ground, harder to spot in the night sky.

They were approaching the area where the creature had been killed, and they were not alone. In the path ahead, Wei Wuxian could make out a flash of very familiar purple.

"YunmengJiang robes," he murmured, frowning. It had been over three years since he had encountered anyone from the sect he'd formerly considered his own. That had not been an accident. He was careful to go only on night hunts that did not border on their lands. It had been hard enough to leave once. He didn't want to have to do it again.

He had been lucky that he hadn't had any run-ins on his journey. As they approached the lone figure walking up the narrow path that approached where the village had once stood, Wei Wuxian realized just how far his luck had betrayed him. He felt a combination of dread and longing as he recognized the familiar, determined gait of the cultivator they were approaching.

"Jiang Cheng," Wei Wuxian murmured.

He had been much better prepared to face the *Xiangliu* than he felt in facing his estranged younger brother. Madam Yu had ensured they hadn't had a chance to say goodbye when Wei Wuxian was kicked out of Lotus Pier. He didn't know if Jiang Cheng had been glad Wei Wuxian was finally gone, or if he'd missed his brother the way that Wei Wuxian had missed his.

Apparently, Wei Wuxian was going to find out. And if he leaned slightly into Lan Wangji's steadying touch at his hip, who needed to know?

To be continued…

Ok, so when I wrote the part about wwx saying he could ride his own sword I LITERALLY HAD TO TIE MY FINGERS DOWN from typing out lwj saying 'no you can ride my sword instead' because like… yeah I write porn but I try to really not make it sound like just a porno dialogue lmfao. But my poor fingers still have the bondage marks on them from my restraint.

Also, what are people's general feelings about Jiang Cheng? Love him? Hate him? Both?

Chapter 6: Other types of energy

A/N - so many comments sharing their feels on Jiang Cheng!!!! I have to say that I was nervous about writing this chapter because I know JC is a polarizing character in the fandom. But he is necessary for the story, so here we go!!! PS I do have the story mapped out all the way through, so it's just a matter of fleshing out and proofing each chapter as I go, which is why I'm posting relatively quickly.

Wei Wuxian's eyes did not falter from the robes of his former brother as Lan Wangji brought them down towards the ground. They dismounted from *Bichen* far enough away from Jiang Cheng that he would not assume they were attacking, but he had clearly either heard or otherwise sensed their approach, and turned to face them, his own sword drawn.

His eyes widened in surprised recognition when he saw them in the pre-dawn light.

"You!" Jiang Chen shouted, his face morphing instantly into a scowl as his gaze locked on Wei Wuxian, hardly throwing Lan Wangji a cursory look. "What the fuck are you doing? You left three years ago, with no word, and now you're dragging our family into whatever this mess of yours is?!"

"Jiang Wanyin," Lan Wangji said, his voice somehow seeming to threaten even though it sounded as expressionless as ever.

"It wasn't like I had a choice," Wei Wuxian replied. Jiang Cheng might be hot-headed, but he wasn't a fool. Madam Yu's wrath was legendary, and there was no way that Wei Wuxian would have left without saying goodbye to his adoptive siblings if he'd had a choice. Still, it didn't mean Jiang Cheng wasn't pissed about it.

Jiang Cheng's gaze flickered over to Lan Wangji before snapping back to Wei Wuxian as he stalked towards them.

"You're here with *him* ? He's the reason you got kicked out of Cloud Recesses! Are you really that friendless that someone who can't stand you is your only option?"

Jiang Cheng's tone was both scathing and angry, but Wei Wuxian had long ago learned not to let most of what the man said bother him. It might have stung to be reminded about how much Lan Wangji had always disliked Wei Wuxian and been annoyed by him during his first visit to Cloud Recesses, but it wasn't new news. And Lan Wangji was helping him, regardless, so he definitely didn't *hate* Wei Wuxian, even if he was likely doing this to help ascertain the level and source of threat to his sect.

"I do not hate Wei Ying," Lan Wangji stated, echoing Wei Wuxian's thoughts.

"See, Jiang Cheng? Lan Zhan doesn't hate me. And he's not so petty to let the fact that he finds me annoying get in the way of protecting his clan."

His words only seemed to anger Jiang Cheng more, for some reason. It had been a long time since Wei Wuxian had dealt with his brother's temper, but he was sure that his brother hadn't changed so much in the past few years. Jiang Cheng used anger as a front for any emotion he was feeling, and it wasn't always clear what he was actually concerned about. Wei Wuxian knew that if he provoked the man enough, eventually whatever was bothering him would come spilling out. It turned out that, for once, Wei Wuxian actually didn't need to do anything more for Jiang Cheng to get to the point.

"Do you have any idea how much trouble you're in?!" Jiang Cheng shouted. Before Wei Wuxian could respond, Jiang Cheng's hand was slamming into Wei Wuxian's shoulder. Normally, the blow wouldn't have done anything, but with Wei Wuxian's core so close to drained, he stumbled back and would have fallen had not Lan Wangji grabbed his arm.

"Jiang *Wanyin* ," Lan Wangji's voice cracked like a whip, as he moved between Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian.

"It's fine, Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian said, gathering himself and moving to stand alongside Lan Wangji. He rested his hand briefly on Lan Wangji's arm to calm the man before he remembered that Lan Wangji hated to be touched, and quickly withdrew his hand. Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian had grown up rough-housing as a way of showing affection as well as aggression, but Lan Wangji had no way of knowing it. "That's just how Jiang Cheng says hello. His manners are as bad as his looks."

The age-old jibe didn't even get an acknowledgement as Jiang Cheng's eyes had grown wide in shock when Wei Wuxian had stumbled.

"What the fuck is wrong with you? Are you drunk?" Jiang Cheng said scathingly, but his eyes were scanning Wei Wuxian for signs of injury. He stepped forward towards Wei Wuxian, but Lan Zhan moved between them again, his hand moving to rest on *Bichen* 's sheath sending a clear message to Jiang Cheng to stand down, though he was too polite to actually speak the words aloud.

"You will not strike Wei Ying," Lan Wangji stated flatly.

Wei Wuxian felt his cheeks heat. Lan Wangji was making it sound like Wei Wuxian was some weakling who couldn't even handle his younger brother. Was he forgetting about the big *legendary monster lying dead* just behind them?

"Lan Zhan, it's fine," Wei Wuxian repeated. "Seriously. But Jiang Cheng, what are you doing here? Surely you haven't been wandering around hoping to run into me so you can shout at me, though I'm sure you've missed it over the past couple of years."

" *Three* years," Jiang Cheng bit out as he glared at Lan Wangji, his pride obviously pricked by the overt challenge as well as possibly the fact that Wei Wuxian had not tried to contact him in all that time. But Jiang Cheng hadn't tried to contact him, either, so he really shouldn't be that pissed about it. Most of Jiang Cheng's anger seemed to be firmly focused on Lan Wangji, however. And the animosity definitely was mutual.

Lan Wangji's golden eyes did not waver from their death glare locked on Jiang Cheng. In the past the two had mostly just… tolerated or ignored the other. This was way past just mutual

annoyance and was bordering on open warfare, for reasons Wei Wuxian didn't really understand. But as amusing as it was for Wei Wuxian to watch the two people who usually were angry with him be angry with each other instead, They didn't have time for it. He also needed to intervene before Jiang Cheng burst a blood vessel or Lan Wangji made a full facial expression and pulled something.

"I don't exactly have an open invitation to come visit Lotus Pier, Jiang Cheng. If you wanted to see me, you could have left word."

Jiang Cheng broke his gaze with Lan Wangji and looked at Wei Wuxian for a moment, his expression unreadable.

"Messages aren't banned from entering Lotus Pier, either. But whatever," Jiang Cheng looked away briefly, then turned back and continued speaking. "A Wen emissary came to Lotus Pier last night, looking for you," Jiang Cheng bit out. "They said you had summoned a demon snake and attacked a village in their territory. They're blaming Lotus Pier for your actions, and said there would be consequences if we do not turn you over to them immediately."

Wei Wuxian sighed. He probably should have assumed that the QishanWen would use him as a scapegoat to cover their own actions. Wei Wuxian had no clan, so accusing him would carry no political ramifications. And Wei Wuxian had a reputation for being a powerful cultivator who flouted the rules, so others would find their story believable.

"I wasn't the one who summoned it!" Wei Wuxian spoke vehemently. "What the fuck, Jiang Cheng! You think I would attack an innocent village?"

He really hoped that they hadn't been able to hide the summoning seals they'd used. It was unlikely that either the GusuLan nor the YunmengJiang clans would take his word on what he'd seen. But he'd be lying if he didn't admit that it hurt at least a little that Jiang Cheng would think he'd do it.

"Wei Ying does not belong to YunmengJiang," Lan Wangji said at the same time, his eyes narrowed. "You have no jurisdiction over cultivators that you cast aside."

Jiang Cheng still looked angry (though part of that was just his face), but he didn't argue with either of Lan Wangji's statements. Wei Wuxian tilted his head, looking at his former brother. Something else wasn't quite adding up.

"Jiang Cheng. Even if you thought I did this, why are you *here* ? We're nowhere near Lotus Pier."

Jiang Cheng's face flushed, and Wei Wuxian knew it wasn't all in anger. "The Wen told us that you'd screwed up the summoning and that the snake had attacked you. They said you would likely come to either Lotus Pier or Cloud Recesses if you survived the battle, since both sects are known for their healers. They've told us that harboring you or giving you medical aid will constitute an act of war against QishanWen. Gusulan and YunmengJiang have both agreed to notify them if you are spotted in our territories, and turn you over to them."

Wei Wuxian took a slow breath, telling himself it was foolish to feel hurt that his old home was abandoning him this way. It wasn't surprising. Madam Yu hated him and wouldn't spit his way if he was dying of thirst. Lan Qiren felt the same, though he would probably be less vulgar in

expressing it. At least Wei Wuxian had Lan Xichen's word that he would protect Wen Ning, A-Yuan, and Wen Qing. He hoped the man would keep it. Lan Wangji tensed beside him at Jiang Cheng's words, and Wei Wuxian wondered if he had known about his sect's position before Jiang Cheng's announcement, and what he thought about it. Wei Wuxian shrugged it off.

It was what it was.

But there *was* something hidden in Jiang Cheng's words that made Wei Wuxian able to put on a grin. "Aw, Jiang Cheng! You were worried about me and came to see if I was ok!"

Jiang Cheng's scowl deepend, which was actually fairly impressive considering its starting point. "Fuck you. I did *not* ! You're obviously fine and as annoying as ever. I just came to tell you not to come looking for help when you keep doing all this stupid shit."

Wei Wuxian felt warmed by his brother's care, but Lan Zhan was definitely not feeling the love.

"Wei Ying is not stupid. He has no need for YunmengJiang's aid nor protection."

This time it was Jiang Cheng who went for the hilt of his sword.

"Ah. Haha! You guys are so funny.," Wei Wuxian laughed, stepping between the two men. "But this is actually perfect. Jiang Cheng, since you are also here, we can all go to see if we can find proof of who actually summoned the creature. Then you can go back to Lotus Pier and let them know what you found, and they won't have to believe me."

Jiang Cheng and Lan Wangji were locked in a battle of aggressive eye contact, and neither seemed to hear him. Wei Wuxian sighed and grabbed Lan Wangji's wrist to pull him towards where the battle had been found and where (hopefully) the body of the *Xiangliu* still rested. He had been prepared for the man to shake his grasp off, but Lan Wangji surprisingly allowed the touch, though he didn't move an inch from his position. He must be truly distracted by his anger at Jiang Cheng to not notice, but Wei Wuxian was going to take full advantage. He tugged on Lan Wangji's wrist again, trying to get him to move

"Come on. You can have your glaring contest later. It will be full light soon, and we want to be out of here if the Wen come back to clean up their mess, if they haven't already."

Jiang Cheng was the one to break eye contact first (again), but this time it was to glare at where Wei Wuxian's hand was wrapped around Lan Wangji's wrist.

"Brother would not have agreed," Lan Wangji said quietly as they walked towards the scene of the battle. Wei Wuxian didn't bother to reply. Either he had or he hadn't, but there was nothing Wei Wuxian could do about it. He would just stay clear of both Lotus Pier and Cloud Recesses until this mess was sorted out.

Luckily, the QishanWen had not come back to clean up their mess. Or - if they had - they had done a poor job of it. The body of the *Xiangliu* lay sprawled roughly where Wei Wuxian had last remembered battling it, its nine heads strewn in messy disarray around the rocky landscape.

Residual traces of Wei Wuxian's chain lightning still occasionally sparked in the rocks, Though not enough remained to do much damage. It's presence likely explained why the Wen had not

been able to conceal the body, though.

Even more importantly, Wei Wuxian could still sense the oddly focused resentful energy coming from the creature, which meant the seals on its body had not yet been removed or destroyed.

“Holy shit. What is that thing?!” Jiang Cheng said, his eyes wide as he looked at the size of the creature before them. “This isn’t just a random demon snake.”

“*Xiangliu* of legend,” Lan Wangji replied. It was hard to tell, but Wei Wuxian thought the man almost sounded smug. Which - fair enough. Lan Wangji had dealt the killing blow to a legendary monster. He could feel proud about it. Wei Wuxian definitely did, now that the sheer terror was over. In retrospect, he was glad he hadn’t really had a lot of time to think about what it was he was actually going to fight when he’d raced over to the village to try to save his friends. He would still have fought it but… yeah. Looking at the creature without the haze of battle around him, he could admit that the thing was terrifying and *huge.*

“Someone *killed* this thing?!” Jiang Cheng asked, his eyes skimmed over the traces of lighting that still sparked on the ground.

“Mm,” Lan Wangji replied, unexpectedly chatty. Yeah, Lan Wangji was definitely feeling some big dick energy coming from slaying this while Jiang Cheng stood there looking awed and impressed.

“Wait. You *Lans* killed this?!” Jiang Cheng was shouting now. Again.

“Wei Ying and I,” Lan Wangji said primly.

“Oh, my god, Lan Zhan! We know you’re packing but you don’t need to fucking jump rope with it!” Wei Wuxian said exasperatedly, though his eyes sparkled with humor. Who knew Lan Wangji could be such a little shit! Wei Wuxian was impressed. He was seeing a whole new side to the stoic and pristine Second Jade. Lan Wangji’s ears pinkened, but he only slanted a brief side-eye at Wei Wuxian before he returned to glaring disdainfully at Jiang Cheng.

“I didn’t know the GusuLan sect worked with lightning.” Jiang Cheng didn’t explicitly mention *Zidian* , and the rare type of lightning that it allowed Madam Yu to wield, but that was more because the weapon was so legendary that no one needed to call it by name.

“Ah, that was me. Haha. I was just messing around, but I’ve had enough… um… experience with lightning attacks to have some ideas,” Wei Wuxian said. Jiang Cheng grimaced slightly. He’d seen Madam Yu use both regular whips as well as Zidian to discipline Wei Wuxian when he was still a disciple at Lotus Pier. They were not fond memories for either man. Lan Wangji gave Wei Wuxian a questioning look, but Wei Wuxian just waved it off.

“Anyway, it only partially worked. Lan Zhan had to come and finish the job.”

Jiang Cheng had always been competitive about the perceptions of the GusuLan’s cultivation prowess versus that of YunmengJiang, and this conversation was not helping with that, so Wei Wuxian rapidly continued.

“Look, some of the villagers told me they’d been seeing signs of some strange toxic water around the village,” Wei Wuxian said, shooting Lan Wangji a speaking glance to tell him to stop

poking the bear. Lan Wangji, of course, ignored him and Jiang Cheng continued to look like he'd eaten something sour.

"Anyway, it wasn't anything I'd ever seen before, so I was researching it at Cloud Recesses," Wei Wuxian took a breath to continue, but Jiang Cheng cut him off.

"You went to Cloud Recesses for help?! I thought you were kicked out! Didn't *Hanguang-Jun's* own uncle tell you you were no longer welcome there?!"

Wei Wuxian hoped that Lan Wangji would ignore the sarcastic way that Jiang Cheng had said his title. The hard line of Lan Wangji's even-more-rigidly-perfect-than-usual posture said it was unlikely.

"Wei Ying aided in the defeat of the Tortoise of Slaughter. The ban was waived," Lan Wangji responded before Wei Wuxian was able to.

Wei Wuxian nearly groaned as he saw Jiang Cheng's jaw tighten further. The man was in serious danger of cracking the bone. Under other circumstanced, he might have thought that the insult was unintentional, but everything about Lan Wangji's body language said it wasn't. He wondered how the man had become so fluent in Wei Wuxian's former family dynamics to know just where to stick his knife.

Jiang Cheng had arrived in search of a YunmengJiang disciple who had been one of several cultivators who had gone missing into the cave, but he had arrived just after Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji had helped the first batch of cultivators escape from the cave. Jiang Cheng had done the right thing by helping the wounded rather than insisting on going for the glory and joining the battle, but it had surely been used as yet another needle that Madam Yu had jabbed into him when she decried his skills and abilities as the sect heir.

"Alright. Dead turtles aside, our issue is this big-ass snake." Wei Wuxian gestured to where the body of the beast lay. "Do you guys feel that energy?" Wei Wuxian asked, finding it oddly ironic that he was the one playing the responsible one when Lan Wangji was here, and that was almost always Hanguang-Jun's job and almost neve Wei Wuxian's. Lan Qiren would have an aneurysm, though he would still probably find a way to make it all Wei Wuxian's fault.

"Feel what?" Jiang Cheng said irritably, but he did stop glaring at them and turned his focus to the monster.

Wei Wuxian looked at Lan Wangji, but he only tilted his head slightly.

"Resentful," Lan Wangji said after a moment.

"Exactly! That's what I noticed, too. But not like normal fierce corpse-type resentful energy. It's a lot more condensed. More focused."

"Wei Ying noticed this in battle?" Lan Wangji questioned.

Wei Wuxian was fully aware of the stigma of even *mentioning* resentful "Yin' energy, and it never made sense to him. Just because people refuse to talk about something doesn't make that thing disappear. Both Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng cast concerned looks in his direction, but Wei Wuxian brushed them off in the same way he had been ignoring the odd resonance he felt

coming from the stone seal he carried. They can judge him all he wants, but if he hadn't sensed the energy and known how to make it visible, they wouldn't have the information they needed to ready their clans against an imminent Wen attack.

"Noticing something isn't the same as causing it," Wei Wuxian muttered as he focused the small amount of spiritual energy he could muster into making the seal to 'reveal hidden energy'. Unlike last time, he kept the symbol narrow, just focused on the resentful energy since he already knew what he was looking for and honestly didn't have any extra to spare. He shoved the seal forward, directing it to the place on *Xiangliu* 's body where he knew the marks to be located. Almost immediately, the dark characters were revealed, though not as clearly as they had been the first time. Either they were fading, or Wei Wuxian hadn't had enough juice to power the talisman as well as he had the first time. In either case, it was enough for the other two to see them.

"How?" Lan Wangji asked, walking forward to examine the characters that had been revealed. Jiang Cheng followed, his face serious as he studied the symbols.

"I don't know," Wei Wuxian said, feeling a little short of breath from the effort of casting the talisman when he was already so low on energy. "But someone has been able to harness and direct enough concentrated, resentful energy to summon the *Xiangliu*. Lan Zhan, explain what Lan Xichen said about the meaning of the placement of the sect symbols."

Wei Wuxian hid the wave of dizziness that washed over him by sprawling negligently on a nearby rock formation and pasting on a grin as he waited for Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng to finish their examination of the seals. Lan Wangji studied him for a moment, a tiny crease forming between his brows, but then faithfully relayed the outcome of the conversation they had had at Cloud Recesses, and the interpretation of what the symbols meant.

"Shit," Jiang Cheng said succinctly. "Those assholes were planning on attacking regardless."

Wei Wuxian was relieved that his former brother was not casting doubt on this. Jiang Cheng's eyes met his. His brother was not great at expressing himself with words (honestly, Wei Wuxian wasn't sure who was worse between Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng), but actions were always how Jiang Cheng showed what he really felt. He gave Wei Wuxian a brief nod, acknowledging the situation. Trusting him.

"I need to get back to Lotus Pier and let them know. The Wen dogs wouldn't have dared to start a war, even with a monster like this, if they didn't have an army already ready to back them up," Jiang Cheng stated, reminding Wei Wuxian of why the man would eventually make a fine sect leader, despite what Madam Yu said. Jiang Cheng paused, still looking at Wei Wuxian. "I will talk to Mother. She… should not have taken the Wen at their word."

The matter of Wei Wuxian's expulsion from the clan wasn't broached, but there was likely not much to say on it. Wei Wuxian nodded, acknowledging his brother's offer, but he didn't really know what to say. Madam Yu's opinion of him wasn't going to change whether she believed the Wen or not. She'd waited his whole life for a reason to kick him out and had jumped on it the instant she had one. There was no going back.

Jiang Cheng still looked as though there was something he wanted to say, but in the end he turned, mounted his sword *Sandu* , and headed back to Lotus Pier.

When Jiang Cheng was gone, Lan Wangji walked over to Wei Wuxian, and knelt down beside him. He pressed two of his fingers to the inside of Wei Wuxian's arm, transferring spiritual energy into him.

"You need to save your strength for the trip back to Cloud Recesses," Wei Wuxian said, though he didn't pull his arm away from the touch. He was honestly exhausted, and the energy was taking away the dizziness. Wei Wuxian closed his eyes, focusing on the feel of Lan Wangji's energy flowing into him. had been healed by others at various times in his life, but he'd never felt anyone else's spiritual energy that was as pure and soothing as Lan Wangji's.

"Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian forced himself to speak, opening his eyes. "You need to get back to Cloud Recesses. They need to have the information about the Wen involvement confirmed so they can prepare for war."

Lan Wangji frowned, but he didn't stop transferring energy.

"I will not leave Wei Ying here," Lan Zhan said.

At the words, Wei Wuxian pulled his arm away, breaking the contact. The tiny spark that had flared to life inside of him when Lan Wangji spoke was dangerous. Wei Wuxian did not belong to a clan, and anyone who took him in was either putting themselves at risk or putting Wei Wuxian in danger of being turned over to the Wen.

"No," Wei Wuxian replied, not flinching from Lan Wangji's golden eyes as they bore into his. "Lan Zhan, you heard what Jiang Cheng said. Someone in your clan has already promised to turn me over if they see me."

"I will not let them hand over Wei Ying," Lan Wangji said firmly.

Wei Wuxian shrugged. "Will you have a say? But even if you're right, then the Wen will use my presence as an excuse to attack, and other clans might not come to the aid of GusuLan."

Lan Wangji's gaze didn't waver, and the silence stretched on.

"Come to Gusu with me," Lan Wangji repeated, his hand gripping *Bichen* 's hilt, somehow it wasn't threatening. Lan Wangji was likely used to being able to use *Bichen* to solve most of his problems. It could not solve this one for him, unless he meant to take Wei Wuxian back by force.

"Any clan that takes me in will be a target. Any clan I go to will be a threat to me, if they have believed the lies that Wen Chao is spreading. I won't put other people at risk, and I won't allow myself to be turned over to the Wen. I'm not going with you, Lan Zhan. You need to go back to Cloud Recesses. You need to make sure Lan Xichen can ready the clan for war. If they won't protect Wen Ning, Wen Qing and A-Yuan, you need to get them out of there. You and your brother gave me your word. Will Hanguang-Jun break his promise to Wei Ying?"

It was a low blow, and even though Lan Wangji's expression didn't change, Wei Wuxian knew he'd scored a direct hit.

"I will never lie to Wei Ying," Lan Wangji said after a moment.

Wei Wuxian smiled slightly. “Lan Zhan is always so good. Never breaking any of the rules. Look, the Wen aren't going to waste their time on me. They have their sights set on Cloud Recesses and Lotus Pier. You're more at risk than I am. There is an area nearby that is out of sight from any of the paths to approach the village or the *Xiangliu* . I’ll rest there for a day or two until I have my strength back.”

Lan Wangji didn’t look happy, but he didn’t have a counter argument. He had to go home and ready his clan for war. Wei Wuxian needed to stay out of sight, at least for now. Even if the truth came out, most clans would still have an issue with the fact that Wei Wuxian was able to make the Yin energy of the seals visible. GusuLan had banned him for simply *talking* about it. He was toying around the edges of dark cultivation in their eyes, even if all he’d done was observe it.

“What will Wei Ying do then?” Lan Wangji finally asked.

Wei Wuxian honestly didn’t know. War was coming, and he knew which side he would be on if they allowed him to fight. “If the Wen attack Cloud Recesses, I will come.”

Lan Wangji didn’t look any happier, but he did not speak.

“The leaders of QishanWen don’t care if they kill their own people,” Wei Wuxian continued. “They are turning the other clans against me. If they attack, I will fight them. I won't let them take Wen Ning, Wen Qing, and A-Yuan. If you need to get them out of the Cloud Recesses, tell them to take shelter at one of the northern temples, outside of any clan territory. I will find them there and keep them safe.”

Lan Wangji nodded, but made no move to say anything more, nor to leave. He simply watched Wei Wuxian, his expression unreadable.

Wei Wuxian realized that Lan Wangji was not going to be the one to leave first. He stood, feeling steady on his feet thanks to the energy that Lan Wangji had given him.

“Good luck, Lan Zhan,” he said quietly before he turned and began walking over the rocky terrain to where the thick woods met the hillside. He felt Lan Wangji’s gaze on him the entire way, but didn’t look back.

He thought he heard the man reply, "Good luck, Wei Ying." But he couldn't be sure it wasn't just the wind.

To be continued...

A/N: The original title of this chapter was actually 'big dick energy' but then it ended so sad so.... Hopefully everyone read the 'angst' tag before starting this, because we're heading into that part of the story. *blows kisses*

Chapter 7: Falling

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A/N - TRIGGER WARNING FOR THIS CHAPTER - if you missed the ‘graphic displays of violence’ tag, and if you have an issue with that, this is not the chapter for you. See more specifics in end note if you are uncertain whether to read it or not. Also, I was told that my intro was misleading because it appeared to be a fluffier story than what it is, so I tried to fix it a bit. (I tend to over-rely on tags, but I know that not everyone reads them). Main point of this story is still the relationship between wwx and lwj but it is in the context of war and sect politics and cultivation bias/judgement.

Wei Wuxian was exhausted, but he walked deep into the woods, away from where the ruins of the village still lay mired in murky water. He would bury the dead once he had replenished his strength. He didn’t let himself feel anything about the fact that he was once again alone. That he’d seen his brother but only for an hour. That he’d been in a house that felt like home with the Wen in Cloud Recesses but could not go back. That he’d had Lan Wangji fighting by his side but was now alone. Wishing for things that he couldn’t have had never gotten him anywhere, and he wasn’t going to do it now.

For the moment, he needed to stay hidden. Being with any of the people he cared about and wanted to protect would only put them at risk. Wei Wuxian was sure that Lotus Pier and Cloud Receses were not the only places where the Wen had been spreading lies about him summoning the *Xiangliu* . Any cultivator who saw him and recognized him would likely turn him in, and in the weakened state he was in he wouldn’t be able to put up much of a fight.

He found a dense copse of trees, with an outcropping of rocks that he could fit between and lie down unseen from any direction of approach. He centered his mind and focused on replenishing his golden core. Now that his injuries were healed, he didn’t need to expend his energy in recuperation and could instead build back his strength.

In his mind, he charted out his next steps. He would bury the villagers and lay them to rest properly. It wouldn’t atone for his failure to save them, but it would hopefully at least prevent unnecessary resentment building up from their corpses.

Then he would go and try to find out where the QishanWen army was, and send word to Jiang Cheng and Lan Wangji about what he saw. If he was lucky, he would be able to monitor their movements and warn the clans of the timing of the attack. The clans would be ready preparing for war (if they weren’t wasting their time out hunting for *him* , but there was nothing Wei Wuxian could do about that), so any reconnaissance would be up to him.

Once he knew where the Wen were going to attack, he could join in the fight whether it was Lotus Pier or Cloud Recesses. He didn’t think the Wen would be foolish enough to attack both

at once. They were stronger militarily than the other clans individually, but they couldn't win if they took on two large clans at once.

Wei Wuxian slowed his breathing, letting his body settle to complete stillness as he slipped drifted into something in between sleep and meditation. None of his plans would matter if he didn't have enough strength to wield his sword.

He was awakened by a shrill cry from the sky above. Judging by the position of the sun, with the midmorning light filtering through the trees, he'd only been asleep for a few hours. He listened for the sound to repeat, and heard it again. This time, he tracked it to a large shadow flying over the area where he lay hidden.

Hidden from approach by ground. Not hidden by sky.

Dire Owl, he thought as he saw the creature circle again.

Wen Chao was nearby. Wei Wuxian did not know if the creature was searching for Wei Wuxian specifically, or just scouting the area.

He lay still, but he could tell that he had already been spotted by the way the bird circled directly above him. Wei Wuxian sat up, slowly turning to sense the direction of anyone who might be approaching him. He had his sword, but he wished he had a bow because he wouldn't need spiritual power to shoot that fucking spy out of the sky. But it was too late, anyway. Wen Chao already knew where he was.

Wei Wuxian didn't bother running. He was too tired to outrun a full-powered cultivator (and Wen Chao was too much of a coward to be in this area alone), even a shitty one like Wen Chao. If the man was foolish enough to hunt him alone, Wei Wuxian had a decent chance of killing him even without much spiritual energy.

Unfortunately, Wen Chao had always been a coward. Wei Wuxian watched silently as nearly thirty soldiers approached him from all sides. There was a ring of archers that stayed further back, their bows already drawn. The closer cultivators had their swords, though they were still sheathed.

For now.

Wei Wuxian would not be getting out of this if it came to a fight, but it was possible he could talk his way out of things if Wen Chao wasn't hunting him *specifically.* They had never met in person. It was possible Wen Chao didn't even know who Wei Wuxian was.

Wei Wuxian put on a cocky grin. "Ah? So many of you come to find only me? I'm honored."

He scanned the faces, but evidently Wen Chao was staying back until he could determine how dangerous Wei Wuxian was. They had never met each other in person before, but Wei Wuxian knew from Wen Qing's description of what to expect. He caught sight of a gaudy robe at the back of the group.

"Wen Chao! Why are you hiding in the back? You've gone to all this trouble to find this one napping in the woods, after all."

The soldiers in the front drew their swords at Wei Wuxian's mocking tone. Wei Wuxian didn't draw *Suibian* . He didn't have enough spiritual energy to fight all these cultivators, so if he was going to get out of this, he'd have to rely on his wits not his sword. Wen Chao was a fool, but he was also petty and fearful. Wei Wuxian's chances of escape depended on Wen Chao's reasons for seeking him out.

Wei Wuxian put on a bored look, as though the thought of fighting a large group of enemy combatants all by himself was boring rather than terrifying. Given the size of the monster lying dead not too far away, they might believe him capable of fighting them all with no effort.

On another day, it might even be true but, unfortunately, that day was not today.

"Wei Wuxian," a smug voice came from the pretentiously robed man who was now making his way forward. Less than a minute into their first meeting and Wen Chao was already living up to his reputation. "You have caused me some difficulties."

"Oh?" Wei Wuxian replied, tilting his head to the side. All hope of Wen Chao not knowing who he was evaporated. "All I was doing was catching up on some sleep. This isn't even QishanWen territory."

Wen Chao smiled. It was the smile of a man whose father always made sure he got what he wanted and never had to face any consequences for his lack of restraint, intelligence or talent.

"Summoning a dangerous creature on Wen lands," Wen Chao said mockingly. Of course, they both knew that Wei Wuxian did no such thing.

"Ah, Wen Chao. You wound me!" Wei Wuxian laid his hand mockingly over his own heart. "This one stumbled upon this fearsome creature, and - even though I received no payment - I took it upon myself to try to protect the village and remove this threat from so near your lands. If anything, one could say you owe me. Unless the QishanWen are claiming ownership of the *Xiangliu.* "

Wen Chao's eyes narrowed. It was unlikely that Wen Chao would know that Wei Wuxian had been able to see the seals, but even Wen Chao wasn't dumb enough to admit such a thing in front of so many people. Wen Ruohan ruled through fear, but there were always spies.

Wen Chao's jaw worked as he tried to think of something to say that would counter Wei Wuxian's claims. It was silly, really, because they were close enough to Wen territory that Wen Chao could do whatever he wanted without any sort of actual reason.

"Causing trouble on my lands. Interfering with sect politics. I heard that you've been spending time in the Cloud Recesses. In particular, with Hanguang-Jun after the trouble you caused here."

Wei Wuxian tensed. Did Wen Chao know that Lan Wangji had helped kill the *Xiangliu* ? How did he know that Wei Wuxian had been in Cloud Recesses so recently? Wen Chao was clearly expecting some kind of response. Jiang Cheng had already said that the Wen thought Wei Wuxian would go either to Cloud Recesses or Lotus Pier for healing, so that seemed safe to admit to.

"I went for healing, not to hang out with anyone. But I only stayed a day or so." Wei Wuxian made sure he was vague enough about the timing so that Wen Chao couldn't claim the Lans had

lied about knowing his whereabouts.

“Healing. But you seem uninjured. Surely if you were so badly wounded that you required the specialized healers of GusuLan, you would still be convalescing.”

Wei Wuxian didn’t know where Wen Chao was going with this, but he played along. “Maybe their healers are just better than yours. Or maybe I didn’t want to deal with my injuries, even if they were small.”

“The GusuLan healers must be very good if they were able to heal you without ever seeing you.”

Shit. How could he know that?

“So evidently you weren’t there for healing. But I heard that Hanguang Jun stayed overnight with you while you were there,” Wen Chao said, the statement so heavy with innuendo that Wei Wuxian felt like he needed to wash himself hearing that tone from Wen Chao’s mouth.

“Uh… Lan Zhan always monitors me when I’m there to make sure I don’t break any rules or… run off with one of their books or whatever. He’s not exactly my biggest fan,” Wei Wuxian said. After being kicked out of Cloud Recesses, this was not a secret to anyone. The bigger problem was that Wen Chao clearly had an informant in Cloud Recesses who was able to monitor things like the whereabouts of Lan Wangji and who visited the healers.

“Is Hanguang-Jun taking you as his cultivation partner?” Wen Chao asked abruptly.

“What?” Wei Wuxian replied. The question made no sense at all. Why would Lan Wangji take *him* as his cultivation partner? He could hardly stand to say two words to Wei Wuxian.

“If you killed the *Xiangliu* , you must have a very powerful golden core to catch his interest. It's not like you’ve got anything else to offer someone in his position.” Wen Chao began to circle Wei Wuxian, clearly liking the sound of his own voice. He still remained safely out of Wei Wuxian’s immediate reach. “This tactic GusuLan is trying to use to shift the balance of power between the clans won’t work,” Wen Chao said angrily. “If Hanguang-Jun takes a cultivation partner, then so can I. He should have accepted my offer when he had the chance. Then maybe Cloud Recesses would be spared.”

Wei Wuxian couldn’t help but laugh. “Why would Hanguang-Jun choose *you* for a cultivation partner? He needs someone with a strong enough core that it would actually help him rather than just be a drain.”

“I am the third strongest cultivator in QishanWen, bested only by my father and my brother! No one else has ever defeated me!” Wen Chao yelled like a spoiled child.

Wei Wuxian rolled his eyes. “Yeah, and I’m sure none of the sparring partners you ever fought against were told to let you win.”

Wen Chao’s face flushed with anger, but then he paused, looking at Wei Wuxian with an odd intensity. “If Hanguang-Jun was willing to consider you despite your reputation and clanless state, you must be exceptionally powerful. QishanWen would have much more to offer you than GusuLan.”

“Wait. What? You… are you asking me to be your cultivation partner?” Wei Wuxian couldn’t keep the disbelief out of his tone. War was about to break out, Wei Wuxian had just killed one of the Wen’s secret weapons and discovered proof that they had summoned and Wen Chao wanted to talk about *cultivation partnerships?* Did he not know that dual cultivation took *years* to increase the power of the cultivators? Not to mention, Wei Wuxian would much rather be impaled on all twenty spiritual swords currently drawn against him than let Wen Chao try to get his dick anywhere *near* Wei Wuxian.

Wen Chao gave an oily smile, though he still did not approach close enough to be within reach of Wei Wuxian’s blade, and kept at least ten of his men between them.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” Wei Wuxian said, unable to keep the scorn from his voice.

“Why? You’re willing to dual cultivate with Lan Wangji, but not with me? We are both second sons, equal in station. And QishanWen is the largest and most powerful of all the clans. With me, you will be much more likely to survive. I guarantee you that Cloud Recesses won’t be standing in a month.”

Wei Wuxian looked at the man in disbelief. “You? Equal to Lan Zhan? You can barely cultivate your way through a bag of leaves. You could be someone’s cultivation partner for fifty years and still not even be half of what Lan Zhan is.”

All remaining swords were immediately drawn. Wei Wuxian couldn’t really regret his words, because this outcome was pretty likely to happen no matter what. He might as well get to have his say.

“You dare?!” Wen Chao’s face turned purple with rage and his guards rushed Wei Wuxian.

Wei Wuxian was able to draw his sword and fend off the first several attacks, but with not very much spiritual energy and being surrounded by so many men, it wasn’t long before *Suibian* was ripped from his grasp and he was shoved face first down onto the ground, his lip split and bleeding into the dirt.

He felt hands grip his limbs, and knees press into the back of his thighs, holding him down.

Once Wei Wuxian was immobilized by at least six men, Wen Chao finally approached him, grabbing a fistfull of Wei Wuxian’s hair and forcing him to look up at him.

“You should have taken my offer. You’ve made a fatal mistake, just like Hanguang-Jun. Everyone says he’s so clever, but if he were really smart, he would have accepted my offer to be cultivation partners. Then we would not need to burn Cloud Recesses to the ground,” Wen Chao said, looking down at Wei Wuxian, utterly confident in his father’s power, and gloating from it. “But unlike Hanguang-Jun, you are not in a position to refuse my offer. I usually prefer women, but if your core is powerful enough, I suppose it will be worth it. Check him!”

One of the cultivators from the back came forward and crouched down by Wei Wuxian. He put two of his fingers together in a motion that was nearly identical to that of Wen Qing’s while she was examining him, then set his fingers to Wei Wuxian’s throat. Wei Wuxian felt the man’s spiritual power flow into his body, and braced for pain or some sort of attack, but there was none.

The man turned and looked at Wen Chao, removing his fingers. “You’re sure this is him?”

Wen Chao hesitated for a moment, but then grabbed Wei Wuxian’s sword from the cultivator who had taken it, turning it so he could read the name etched on the sword. “ *Suibian* . This is Wei Wuxian’s blade. Why?”

The medical cultivator stepped back. “Because he doesn’t have much of a golden core. That small fight we just had basically drained him. His energy levels are extremely low. Even if the battle with the *Xiangliu* was several days ago, he should have recovered by now if he’s really as strong as everyone says. Severe injuries can drain the core while the body recovers, but his injuries were obviously not that severe or he wouldn’t have been able to leave Cloud Recesses so quickly.”

“His core could just be slow to replenish,” Wen Chao said, doubtfully.

The medical cultivator shook his head. “Dual cultivation requires both a strong golden core and rapid energy replenishment to be effective. If you’re seeking a cultivation partner to build your strength, Wei Wuxian would not be a good choice.”

Wei Wuxian snorted out a laugh. The man might have received medical training with Wen Qing, but he couldn’t tell a drained core from a small one, and he couldn’t detect recently healed major injuries. Wei Wuxian kept his thoughts to himself, though. He had no desire to be viewed as ‘attractive’ to Wen Chao. Maybe if they thought he wasn’t a threat, they would let him go.

Wen Chao immediately disabused him of that idea.

“Kill him,” Wen Chao ordered after a moment of studying him. “But only after he tells me how he managed to kill the *Xiangliu* . Did someone help you? How could a single cultivator kill it? You must have some weapon, some power. Why else would the Lans want you?”

“Fuck you,” Wei Wuxian spat, earning himself a sharp kick to his ribs. Without his spiritual energy to fortify his body, he felt the bones crack. Whatever he did, he needed to ensure that Wen Chao did not find out that the clans were already being notified about who summoned the *Xiangliu.* They needed to believe they still had the element of surprise. He smirked up at Wen Chao. “Not like it would help you, anyway. You’re too weak of a cultivator to be able to do anything I could teach you.”

Wei Wuxian had briefly considered bluffing about having a hidden weapon, but the Wen were known for their torture methods, and they would guard him heavily if they believed he had such value. Wei Wuxian would choose a quick death over a slow one any day. There was a flurry of kicks to his body after that. Wei Wuxian just clenched his teeth and waited for it to be over, his fingernails digging into the coarse dirt as he fought to keep from crying out. Maybe they would just beat him and leave him for dead. He had plenty of experience surviving brutal beatings.

It seemed as though Wen Chao still had more to say before he left, though. Wei Wuxian thought that the beating was more pleasant than listening to the man talk. Wen Chao leaned forward, keeping his voice low so that only the cultivators holding him down and the medic standing next to him could hear his words.

“My father is not pleased that you killed the *Xiangliu* . It was the key to neutralizing two of the enemy sects while he went for the third. How do you propose to repay him for this

inconvenience?"

"Not my fault your dad had a shitty plan," Wei Wuxian gritted out. Through the haze of pain, Wei Wuxian wondered who the third sect was. Nie or Jin, most likely. But why one and not the other?

"Do not insult my father!" Wen Chao shouted, raising his sword for what Wei Wuxian hoped would be a quick killing blow.

"Wait!" The Wen medic shouted. Wen Chao glared at him, but stayed his sword.

"Wen Rouhan told us to make sure that no one knows the serpent was controlled by him."

Wen Chao rolled his eyes. "And if I kill him, then he can't tell anyone about it. It's not like I planned on letting him live once I found out how useless he was." He raised his sword again, but again the man stopped him.

"But Hanguang Jun knows how to speak with the dead with his Guqin," the cultivator said. "And this man has been in his company recently."

Wen Chao paused, unsure what to do.

Wei Wuxian laughed ignoring the pain that gripped his entire body. "God, Wen Chao, you're so stupid. Can't keep your own mouth shut. At least you have someone in your clan who knows something."

"Shut up!" Wen Chao said, his boot kicking full force into Wei Wuxian's back.

Wei Wuxian felt more blood fill his mouth, but he grinned as he spat it out, because *fuck* Wen Chao. Of all the people to kill him, Wen Chao was just about his last choice. He'd much rather have been killed by the *Xiangliu* . At least that would have been an *interesting* death.

But maybe he could buy more time. If they threw him into their prison thinking him weakened and not much of a threat, there was a chance he could escape and warn Lan Wangji about the spy. He needed to think fast, and clear his head, which was currently swimming from the pain. But physical pain was something Wei Wuxian had grown up with, thanks to the gentle hand of Madam Yu. He knew how to push it aside when he needed to.

"I'll tell you another thing you probably didn't know. I wasn't born into a noble family. That means I can come back as a vengeful spirit if you kill me. And there will be nothing you can do to stop me."

Wen Chao's gaze flickered to the man who had warned him about Lan Wangji, but the cultivator only shrugged. "He could be telling the truth. I remember hearing that he was adopted as a child by Jiang Fengmian, before he got thrown out of the clan."

Wen Chao scoffed, but he looked unsettled. Then an idea appeared to come to him. "Well, then I'll just have to make sure that you die in a place where even your soul can't escape."

Wei Wuxian wasn't sure what Wen Chao meant, but the reaction of the guards around him made it clear that they understood Wen Chao's words clearly.

“Bring him!” Wen Chao shouted to the men who were holding Wei Wuxian down.

Four sets of hands grabbed Wei Wuxian’s arms and legs, lifting him up. He found himself being carried between four cultivators on their swords, with Wen Chao just in front of them. He thought briefly how Lan Wangji had been able to carry him all by himself on his sword, but it took four of Wen Chao’s men to do it. He couldn’t believe he was going to be killed by such a pathetic group of cultivators.

They went up higher than usual, but before Wei Wuxian could wonder about it, Wen Chao was speaking.

“You told me something that I didn’t know about you, so I will return the favor,” Wen Chao said smugly. “I know that you weren’t the only guest in the Cloud Recesses. Wen Qing and her little brother are also trying to hide there from us. And a small child as well.”

Wei Wuxian felt his blood freeze, and it had nothing to do with the altitude that they were flying.

“Oh, was that a reaction? Wen Qing is very pretty. Much more my type than you or Hanguang Jun. I have no use for children, but she would be… entertaining to keep. She must have a strong golden core as well. When our informer lets us past the barrier into Cloud Recesses, I will make sure I bring her with me before I burn it to the ground.”

Wen Chao looked back over his shoulder, clearly reveling in whatever expression was currently on Wei Wuxian’s face.

“Or maybe your Jiang Yanli. She doesn’t have much of a golden core, but I suppose I could find some use for her.”

Wen Chao’s words made Wei Wuxian’s skin crawl, and he lunged against his captors, his whole body vibrating with the single-minded desire to get his hands around Wen Chao’s throat and squeeze the life out of him.

“Jiang Cheng will never let you touch shijie!” Wei Wuxian shouted, still trying fruitlessly to wrench free from the hands that gripped him.

Wen Chao laughed. “You might have killed the *Xiangliu* , Wei Wuxian, but the creature’s toxin can still be harvested. Father sent me to collect it. We will complete that mission when we’re done with you. Lotus Pier is built on water and Cloud Recesses has springs that the cultivators use for meditation. That’s part of why we chose that creature in the first place. It won’t matter how powerful those cultivators are if they’re paralyzed. You see,” Wen Chao said smugly. “Father’s plan was better than you gave him credit for. All you did was make it harder for us to make it look like a random attack. But it won’t change the outcome. Lotus Pier and Cloud Recesses will fall.”

Wei Wuxian felt a tidal wave of rage and fear fill him. He had to escape. He had to warn them. Jiang Cheng… he couldn’t… He couldn’t let Wen Chao get his hands on Shijie or on Wen Qing. What would happen to Wen Ning or A-Yuan? A million scenarios spiraled through his head, each worse than the last.

If he could only get to them, he could prevent this. He could warn them.

He vaguely registered the dense well of resentful energy that they were approaching. His mind was too focused on the horrors of what Wen Chao's words were painting for him to register where they were.

"Why are you telling me all this?!" Wei Wuxian cried out, straining with everything he had to break free. There was a small chance he could survive the fall. It was a chance worth taking, if only he could manage it.

Wen Chao grinned and bent down so his face was only inches from Wei Wuxian's as he balanced on his sword. "You think you're so smart. But you're nobody. No clan. No family. You think you're so clever, but here you are. At my mercy. You have all of this precious *information* that could save your friends. But there's nothing you can do about it. You're going to die, knowing that you failed. And I won. Go to hell, Wei Wuxian!"

With that, Wen Chao signalled his men and they released him. From the height they had been flying at, there was almost no way Wei Wuxian would survive the fall.

With his last bit of energy, he sent off a single butterfly. He didn't know if it would make it, the integrity of the spell was so low due to his lack of power.

He plummeted towards a dark mass, only at the last moment realizing where Wen Chao had taken him.

The Burial Mounds.

No cultivator had ever returned from entering. No soul ever responded to Inquiry calling to it.

Wei Wuxian felt the darkness reaching up to him, wrapping around him as he fell.

To be continued...

A/N - I have the next chapter almost entirely written and my plan is to get it up sometime this weekend, so it won't be a super long wait.

Chapter End Notes

Wen Chao has his men hold Wei Wuxian down and beat him,severely enough to break bones, and the scene is described in some detail, with references to past child abuse. There is also a threat of noncon by Wen Chao to wwx, but it is not carried out.

Chapter 8: Darkest Darkness

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Any fellow nerds know where I took this title from? LOL

A/N - TRIGGER WARNING AGAIN FOR THIS CHAPTER -

Continued description of physical trauma and additional mental/psychological trauma. See end note if you think this might not be the chapter for you.

Wei Wuxian felt himself hurtling towards the ground, but somehow the faster he went the more time seemed to slow. He closed his eyes and waited for the impact that was sure to kill him. He felt the tendrils of the dark energy of the Burial Mounds reach out to him, wrapping around him like fingers, welcoming a new corpse to the Mounds.

He wondered if his message would reach its intended recipient. If the three short words he'd managed to form into it would be understood.

If it would be enough to help, even if they were.

The seal in his pouch had been vibrating as they had approached the Burial Mounds, but now it seemed to almost come alive. The fingers that grasped at Wei Wuxian, pulling him down, seemed to now curl around his body, digging into his mind. His rate of descent seemed to be slowing, but he was sure that was only his imagination.

Then everything went black.

When Wei Wuxian regained a sense of himself, the only thing he could really register was that he was not dead. The impact that should have killed him had been muted just enough to not achieve Wen Chao's immediate goal.

His entire body felt as though it had been broken and pressed flat, which was probably not a bad approximation to what had happened. He drew in a gasping breath, coughing painfully as particles of dirt and detritus of the Burial Mounds were sucked into his mouth along with the dead air. He was laying face down, pinned to the earth by a combination of his own injuries and some overwhelming pressure bearing down on him..

He was alive. But he was not ok.

He could not move. He could not think. He was not entirely sure he could breathe. The thick coils of resentful energy that had partially slowed his descent now bore down upon him with a suffocating weight. The spiritual pressure blocked all access to any Yang energy he might have in his golden core, or any possibility of regenerating it.

His sword was still with Wen Chao, but he would not have been able to wield it anyway.

He forced his eyes open but could not see much in the swirling darkness. Was it night? Day? It was impossible to tell. He had no idea how long he'd been laying there half-suffocated in the dirt. He drifted in and out of consciousness, though it was hard to tell when he was conscious or not.

Everything was hazy, but at least the pain in his body was going numb. Probably not a good sign, but he couldn't bring himself to care.

He did not know if he had broken bones or torn flesh in the fall. He could not feel his body outside of just the overwhelming sensation of being suffocated and held down. His mind and spirit were flooded with angry murmurs, resentful echoes of the final thoughts of the thousands of dead that surrounded him.

Gradually, the murmurs grew clearer, allowing Wei Wuxian to make out the words. The voices came in a torrent, slamming into his mind and incapacitating him from all other thought.

" *... died alone, no one came…"*

"... so afraid, someone help…"

"... was innocent. They executed me anyway… "

"... they killed my family…"

"... they took everything…"

"... Mommy! Mommy, help me!..."

"... it hurts…"

"... alone…"

"... unfair…"

"... afraid…"

"... abandoned…"

"... they should pay…"

"... they should know…"

"... they should learn…"

Wei Wuxian heard screaming, and realized it was coming from his own throat. His fingers dug into the dirt, bits of bone and debris embedding themselves under his fingernails. The air his lungs drew in was thick with death, but it was nothing to the way the consciousness of the Burial Mounds drew death into his psyche.

Thousands of voices, beating against the insides of Wei Wuxian's mind. So much resentment from so many dead. One of Wei Wuxian's strengths had always been that he had a multi-track

mind, able to process many different things at once. In cultivation and during his previous battles, it was a gift.

In the depths of the Burial Mounds, it was a curse.

Instead of just feeling the rush of voices wash over him, he was able to hear and focus on each one simultaneously. He heard all of their stories. He felt all of their pain. His mind was flooded, images of loss, paid, death, betrayal, fear, and desolation filling every crevice of his consciousness. The Wen had used the Burial Mounds to dump the dead of their experiments, their enemies,their callousness and their indiscretions.

It was agonizing, and it resonated deep within Wei Wuxian's being. He *knew* their pain. He had felt it himself.

The dark consciousness of the Burial Mounds seemed to feel the resonance within him, and it pressed harder. The resentful energy of the Burial Mounds was like a living thing, seething and writhing with solid, physical form. It possessed a fragmented consciousness that made it impossible to think.

Impossible to fight.

Impossible to even breathe.

He lost all sense of time. Had he been laying there for hours? Days? Weeks?

In the moments before his fall, when Wei Wuxian had imagined how he would die in the Burial Mounds if he survived the fall, he had vague thoughts of being ripped apart by fierce corpses.

But that was not how the Burial Mounds killed. Wei Wuxian was sure that there were any number of corpses around him, but there was no need for them to fight him individually. Their resentful energy had been so compressed by the sheer magnitude of bodies left in such a small space that they acted as a collective.

Any intruder was assaulted by the combined anguish of hundreds, maybe thousands of trapped souls, broken consciousnesses. They thirsted to be heard. To be avenged.

The Burial Mounds didn't need to kill by physically ripping its victims apart. It could kill by paralyzing the mind, crushing the spirit, and suffocating the body. It was no wonder that no cultivator had ever survived the Mounds. There was no way to access Yang energy of one's golden core here.

Wei Wuxian gave a slow blink. He couldn't remember when the last time he took a breath was.

The world around him swam in a dark haze. He couldn't tell what was happening in reality around him versus inside his mind. The images from the dead pulled out memories from Wei Wuxian's own life. Orphaned by his parents, the dogs that tore at his terrified body, abandoned by his adoptive family, blamed for things he didn't do, helpless as the villagers drowned, Wen Chao throwing him down, with no one who would notice Wei Wuxian was gone, no one to try to help him, powerless, …

“ *Yess..”* he felt more than heard the words (were they words? Or some other form of communication…), and the pressure that had been trying to suffocate him before now suddenly shifted, penetrating into him instead of simply pressing down.

“ *Yes. You are one of us.”*

“You feel our pain.“

“You are strong.”

“You hear our stories.”

“You are not like the others.”

“You can know us.”

“Know ALL of us.”

The last comment turned out not to be a suggestion, but a command. Every door in his mind was suddenly forced open, blown off their hinges.

Wei Wuxian couldn’t tell where his thoughts left off and the memories of the dead around him took over. They blended together in an endless sea of despair and resentment. He felt their memories solidifying in with his own, their hunger to be heard, to be remembered, to be avenged, latching desperately on to a mind that was able to store them all.

It was overwhelming,

It was killing him.

He would die and he would never be able to warn Lan Zhan about the spy in Cloud Recesses.

He would die and he would not be able to protect A-Yuan, Wen Ning, and Wen Qing.

He would die and he would never be able to see his Shijie or Jiang Cheng again.

He would die and everyone would believe the lies Wen Chao spread about him summoning the *Xiangliu* .

He would die and no one would mourn him... no one would ever even find his body.

He would die and Wen Chao would get away with killing him and the people Wei Wuxian loved.

No.

“No!” Wei Wuxian screamed, his words smothered in the darkness around him.

He tried to impose his clarity and will on the energy pressing down on him, but it was like trying to hold back a tidal wave by blocking it with his hands. It simply flowed around his attempts and kept going. The approach to commanding his own spiritual energy did not work with resentful energy, because there were too many different fragments of consciousness.

Wei Wuxian took another struggling breath. What had changed the behavior of the resentful energy when it shifted from trying to kill him to trying to embrace him hadn't been when Wei Wuxian tried to tell it what to do. It was when he'd listened to what it was telling him. Like a damn breaking inside of his mind, Wei Wuxian knew why it was that the cultivators always said that resentful energy could not be controlled. They were trying to use the same approach that they used with their own spiritual energy.

The key to cultivating resentful energy was not control. It was empathy.

The Burial Mounds had responded to Wei Wuxian because he had opened his mind and let their agony and anguish in, connecting it with his own. He didn't try to shut it out or fight against it. He focused now on opening his mind further, letting the darkness fill him completely.

The fragmented consciousness of the resentful energy couldn't be grasped and controlled like a single spell, or a single thought. It could only be directed, like the flow of water. Grasp too hard, and the individual droplets would slip through your fingers.

But the current could be directed.

"I will help you. I will help you find vengeance. I will help you find peace. But I can't do that if I die here with you."

A few of the voices in his head seemed to respond positively to that, but most of his words were drowned out in the relentless torrent of stories of the dead. They couldn't hear him.

Wei Wuxian felt his consciousness fading again, when an image of Lan Zhan playing the guqin flashed across his mind.

Music.

The Lans used music to communicate with the dead. It allowed their will to be heard, even across the spiritual divide. *Inquiry* wasn't the same as *Empathy* , but there were similarities.

Wei Wuxian had no instrument with him, but the area of the Burial Mounds he had landed in had a grove of black bamboo. The stalks were imbued with the resentful energy that swirled around it, fed through soil built on the corpses of the spirits that inhabited the Mound. If anything could speak to the dead beneath his feet, it would be a flute grown from their physical remains.

Wei Wuxian looked over to the nearest grove. He wasn't that far from where he had fallen, but in his current condition it felt like a vast distance. He wasn't able to stand, weak from days without food or water, and still under the pressure of the heavy resentful energy that was overtaking him. He dragged himself forward, inch by inch, sliding on his stomach. His fingernails dug into the soil for purchase as he pulled himself slowly along the ground. His broken ribs screamed out in agony, and he realized he had also dislocated his shoulder in the fall. But none of that could matter. He would die if he didn't reach the grove.

He collapsed back down on his stomach, his arms shaking with effort, sweat cold against his skin. But he'd made it. The stalk of bamboo growing next to him was thick enough to meet his needs, a little over two centimeters in diameter. He closed his eyes, focusing the tiny amount of

his spiritual energy that he was able to access into the tips of his fingers, ignoring the way his hand shook.

He flicked his hand, sending the tiny band of energy in a tight line, cutting the bamboo stalk in a clean slice. He gasped as the full length of it fell on top of him. After several breaths, he was able to focus a small amount of energy into his fingers again, slicing it again into a length a bit longer than his forearm. He had no idea how long it took him to complete. He could only estimate the spacing between the holes that were needed.

In the end, the instrument was far from perfect, but all it had to do was play. The *dizi* seemed somehow even darker than the original stalk of bamboo it had come from as Wei Wuxian looked at it through the hazy darkness.

He took a slow breath, ignoring the pain in his ribs as he blew softly into the flute. It took him a few tries to get enough air to squeeze from his lungs, and to find the right angle of the crudely hewn instrument to get a pure note, but finally he managed it. He didn't have much spiritual energy to put into his playing, but that was not the style of cultivation he was attempting, anyway. He let the small amount of his own energy he was able to access trickle into his notes, but focused mostly he focused on calling the energy swirling around him to flow into the instrument. Wei Wuxian gave it direction. He did not try to silence or smother it as other cultivators had (no matter how powerful the cultivator, a single golden core's worth of Yang energy would never be enough to drown out the sea of Yin energy in the burial mounds, and those who had gone before Wei Wuxian had been fools to try). Wei Wuxian listened to it, caressed it, gave it shape and form and purpose.

He pulled in, instead of pushing out.

The stone seal in his pouch was calling with him. Darkness swirled and surged around him. Wei Wuxian kept his eyes closed, trying to concentrate despite the fogginess of his mind, overwhelmed by the constant stream of memories that were not his own, and weakened by pain and hunger. Cultivation of resentful energy was absolutely nothing like cultivation of his own spiritual energy. Not only was the entire process reversed but it was also tremendously different in the scale of power involved.

As strong as Wei Wuxian's golden core was, it was still only the spiritual power of a single person. It was a small stream for most, verging on a moderate river for the truly powerful cultivators. In comparison, the resentful energy from the hundreds or even thousands of dead in the Burial Mounds was… a tsunami in a deep ocean. Overwhelming and all consuming.

Utterly deadly.

Wei Wuxian played his flute and drew it into him. Into his flute. Into the stone seal.

Wei Wuxian felt the darkness flowing through him, carving new paths into his spiritual core and his psyche. He could feel it changing him, in the same way as the knowledge and experience of war can change a soldier forever with things that can never be unseen. In the way that losing a parent or a child leaves internal wounds that never heal. He absorbed the spiritual wounds of the dead that surrounded them, and - in return - they gave him their power.

The merging of memories and emotions allowed Wei Wuxian to guide their energy, but at a cost that he was only beginning to understand.

Energy poured into him, and he could feel his starved, withered flesh regaining life with its essence. His eyes burned, and began to glow red in the darkness. His hair, which had been hanging limp and dirty moments before, began to blow in a wind that stirred from the bones of the dead. His skin remained deathly pale, but his lips darkened with the power he was absorbing.

The energy was purging him clean and tainting him forever at the same time.

If he lived through this, Wei Wuxian would surely be reviled as a demon, corrupted by the Yin energy he was now channeling. But it didn't matter. He had already lost his parents, and his adoptive clan. He had already been shunned and alone. Embracing the darkness would enable him to survive the Burial Mounds.

Surviving would mean he could to warn Lan Wangji

Surviving would mean he could protect A-Yuan, Wen Ning, and Wen Qing.

Surviving would mean he could save Lotus Pier, even if Madam Yu had made it clear that Wei Wuxian was always seen as only an obligation and a liability.

Surviving would mean he could *kill Wen Chao* .

The voices in his head latched on to that final goal, the hunger of the Burial Mounds for revenge against one of their main tormentors overwhelming. A dark smile painted Wei Wuxian's red lips, the form of it unfamiliar but somehow natural at the same time.

Lan Wangji, Jiang Cheng and even his Shijie would now view him as corrupted beyond repair, but that wouldn't really matter. They were all better off without him anyway.

Jiang Cheng had always resented him, always had to fight to get out of Wei Wuxian's shadow. Madam Yu had pointed out for years that Wei Wuxian only ever held Jiang Cheng back from getting the recognition he deserved. Madam Yu had used Wei Wuxian's being expelled from Cloud Recesses and causing Shijie's engagement to the Jin Peacock to be broken as the final excuse to make Jiang Fengmian agree. She had hated how Wei Wuxian's strengths always outshone Jiang Cheng, making him appear weaker than he actually was and denying him the respect he would need as a clan leader. Jiang Cheng would be a better sect leader with Wei Wuxian gone.

Shijie would marry and start a family of her own, with no desire to have her children corrupted by such a dark presence. Wei Wuxian had already heard rumors that the engagement with the Jin heir was being discussed again. She would always love him, but his presence would just bring conflict between following the wishes of her husband's family (because no matter who she married, they would likely not like Wei Wuxian but especially if it was that peacock, Jin Zixuan, who Wei Wuxian had literally punched in the face).

Lan Wangji would soon be finding a cultivation partner, and have no time to go on surprise night hunts with Wei Wuxian. Lan Wangji had always been loyal to his clan and the sect rules, so there was no way he would spend much time with Wei Wuxian when the GusuLan elders had already

offered to turn Wei Wuxian over to the Wen without even bothering to look into it. Proof never mattered when it came to Wei Wuxian, and ‘obeying your elders’ was one of the many clan rules that Lan Wangji lived his life by.

Wen Qing could take care of Wen Ning and A-Yuan, and they would also be safer without Wei Wuxian there stirring up controversy. Zewu-Jun had promised to protect them, and he had a whole clan behind him. Wei Wuxian had nothing.

Wei Wuxian was alone, and therefore had nothing to lose by fully embracing this power that was coursing through his veins, reshaping his flute even as he played, embedding itself deep within the stone seal he carried.

Except he wasn’t alone any longer. Not really. He heard the voices all around him. Or was it in his head? He didn’t know.

It didn’t matter.

All that mattered was revenge, for himself and the rest of the spirits of the Burial Mound, and protecting the ones he loved, even if they no longer loved him in return.

With that thought dominating his mind, Wei Wuxian continued to play. Power surged through him, pulsed around him. The *dizi* grew heavier in his hands, the bamboo growing so dark it seemed to be absorbing the light around it, its notes coming clearer as it was reforged as the dark energy poured into it. Where his sword had been a weapon of Yang spiritual power, his flute was becoming one of Yin.

The seal he carried seemed to be absorbing the very consciousness of the Burial Mounds as he played, channeled by Wei Wuxian's flute and coiling around his memories. The seal belonged to Wei Wuxian now. The power of the Burial Mounds was his to control. His red eyes glowed brighter, piercing the darkness.

Wei Wuxian wasn't sure if he had died in the Burial Mounds, but he had definitely been re-born. Resurrected as the voice of those who had died here. He would be the hand to deliver their vengeance, along with his own.

The Burial Mounds shook with an energy that no one had ever wielded before. An energy that would now answer to Wei Wuxian’s command.

He would save his family and friends. And he would find Wen Chao and let the spirits of the Burial Mound tear his flesh and grind his bones to dust.

To be continued...

A/N - I was totally fascinated by the idea of coming up with an entirely new way of cultivating, and I spent some time thinking about why Wei Wuxian would be the first to do it, given other cultivators must have encountered strong resentful energy and been desperate before but never tried it. And it definitely wasn't that they were all 'such good and pure people so they didn't want to do something bad', since we see over and over that wwx is morally better than pretty much all of them. So this is what I came up with. But I would love your thoughts as well! I think it is a

really cool part of the canon universe and it was left a bit ambiguous, so it's fun to try to fill in the blanks. (Yes, I am a huge nerd but we just don't talk about that….)

Chapter End Notes

All you really need to know about this chapter is that Wei Wuxian comes out of it as the canonically dark version of himself and has learned how to cultivate resentful energy. And - like in canon - it changes how he views himself especially relative to Lan Wangji and Lotus Pier, because he knows how the cultivation world will judge him.

Chapter 9: Return from hell

A/N - I was really interested in how wwx would feel when he first got out of the Burial Mounds, and how that all worked, so this chapter is about exploring that.

At some point, Wei Wuxian realized he could breathe. It was a strange realization, because it wasn't as though he had felt like he hadn't been breathing before. But he could breathe almost normally, without feeling as though the very air around him was constricting his chest and clogging his throat. His breaths came almost normally, and his body no longer felt as though it were being compressed by a great weight.

Wei Wuxian had either passed out or fallen asleep so many times over the past unknown number of days that everything had begun to blur together, but - as he sat up and looked around - things seemed different. He still could hardly see through the murky haze of the Burial Mounds, which left him feeling as though he were in perpetual twilight and made it impossible to count the number of days that passed or have any sense of time. But he could move almost freely. He stood, surprised to notice that his ribs and shoulder no longer hurt. He tentatively tested his range of motion and found it… normal. Which was weird, considering that he had not consciously re-set his bones nor healed himself.

The resentful energy of the Burial Mounds still pulsed around him, whispering its thoughts and demands in his head. Wei Wuxian wondered if his new ability to move more freely was because so much of the energy had been absorbed into the stone seal and flute he carried, or if his own body had somehow been altered to coexist with the oppressive weight of the Mounds. The latter thought was rather unsettling, but he didn't stay to ponder it.

If he could move, then he could walk. If he could walk, he could leave the Burial Mounds. He had no idea how much time had passed, whether the message he had sent had been received or understood. He had no idea if the people he cared about were still alive or not.

He had to find out. He had to at least try to help. He would fight for them if he wasn't too late, and avenge them if he was.

Either way, he was going to kill Wen Chao.

With that thought foremost in his mind, Wei Wuxian began to walk. It was slow going at first, as his body was not used to movement. He played his flute, calling two of the dead to follow him on his journey.

It was interesting, how power after death didn't always tie to power during life. The two Wei Wuxian chose to accompany him were not former cultivators, nor warriors. The first was a young courtesan, who had been killed by Wen Chao when he tired of her rather than freeing her family of their debts like he had promised. The second was a young child, who had witnessed the slaughter of her parents then been left to starve to death alone. Their resentment and anguish was all-consuming. They would fight by Wei Wuxian's side as he took down Wen Chao and any who tried to protect him.

Wei Wuxian promised the other spirits that he would return to help them find vengeance if he could, and be properly laid to rest. The spirits of the Burial Mounds were willing to let him go, knowing he was carrying their memories and their pain with him. He was part of them now.

And they were a part of him.

The dark haze gradually began to thin as Wei Wuxian walked out of the Burial Mounds. A memory from his childhood flickered in his mind, of swimming in the deepest waters at Lotus Pier, and staying under as long as his lungs could bear it (always competing with Jiang Cheng to see who could stay under longer). When he'd reached his limit, he would swim desperately towards the surface. The light would grow brighter and brighter until he burst out into the open air, gasping for breath and laughing with Jiang Cheng, trash talking about who stayed under longer or swam deeper.

Finally emerging into the full sunlight wasn't the exuberant feeling of his past, and there was no one there to share it with him. But he had the same sense of gasping for breath, sucking in lungfuls of fresh air for the first time in however long. The brightness of the light from the sun dazzled him, hurting his eyes. He stood for a moment at the edge of the Burial Mounds, somewhat disoriented. He had lost all sense of time and direction while he was gone. The landscape around him was unfamiliar, since he'd been dropped in from the sky and hadn't walked in himself.

His hands and wrists glowed oddly pale in the sunlight, despite the dirt that covered them. They contrasted sharply with his *dizi* , which seemed to be more than just black, as though the flute were absorbing all the light that dared approach it. He wondered if he would look strange to others, or if it was only to himself that he looked like another one of the corpses he had spent the past unknown amount of time keeping company with.

His body felt… translucent. Brittle.

He looked at his hands again, focusing on them and making sure they were solid. In that moment, he realized that - somewhere in the recesses of his mind - he might have been afraid he had actually died. After all, he'd met many spirits who didn't know they were dead. Who was to say Wei Wuxian would not be one of those unfortunate deaths. But no, his body was solid and real. Thinner and paler than before, but alive.

He blinked, trying to get his thoughts in order. He wondered if he were the first person to ever walk out of the Burial Mounds alive, and decided that the odds were good that he was. He'd never heard of anyone else surviving. His mouth twisted into a dark smile as he imagined what the look on Wen Chao's face would be when he caught up with him.

He paused on the perimeter of the Mounds. As torturous as being dropped into the Burial Mounds to die had been, the fact was that he had *survived.* Not only survived, but he had come out with a strength that no one would be expecting. He had grown strong in a place that would kill those who came against him.

To anyone else, the Burial Mounds was a death sentence. To Wei Wuxian, it was a safe haven. Endless corpses and resentful energy. It was more than just safety… it was an arsenal. No one could hurt him there.

He could go forth with an army of undead behind him, if he chose, and no one could stand in his way.

He felt the power surge through him, whispers encouraging him to do exactly that. To go and crush all those who had caused the dead to meet their fate, and all those who stood by and let it happen. All those who had wronged Wei Wuxian and harmed those he loved.

His hands clenched around his *dizi* with the need to act.

He drew a shaky breath, taking back control of his thoughts. He needed to focus. There were two things Wei Wuxian needed to do. Find out what the current status of Lotus Pier and Cloud Recesses were, and kill Wen Chao. As much as the voices in his head were clamoring for the second, Wei Wuxian knew he would start with the first. He would protect the living before he avenged the dead.

He fought down a wave of panic at the knowledge that A-Yuan and *Shijie* could already be dead. He could have completely failed Wen Qing, Lan Zhan, and Jiang Cheng if his message didn't get through or wasn't understood. Had they wondered why he didn't help? Had they thought he didn't care?

Wei Wuxian brushed his hand over the empty place on his hip where *Suibian* usually resided. Now that he was free of the thick cloud of resentful energy of the Burial Mounds, his core would finally be able to replenish itself. But what would happen to all the resentful energy that Wei Wuxian had drawn in while he was there? Would it neutralize any attempts for him to cultivate Yang energy? Could he do both at the same time?

At the moment, his core was still depleted and Wen Chao had his fucking sword. He played a few notes, calling to the two spirits he had chosen to accompany him. Other cultivators would judge him for the path he was taking. But Wei Wuxian wouldn't shy away from protecting the people he cared about just because others didn't like his methods. He looked down at his flute, the opaque blackness of it making it clear that it was more than just a simple instrument. It was a spiritual weapon, just as much as *Suibian* was. And it needed a name.

Chenqing , Wei Wuxian decided. That would be its name. At least with the dead, it allowed him to explain his actions and draw them to his cause. He might be condemned for walking a crooked path, but would it not be worse to refuse to help the ones he cared about? Let them judge him, then. Wei Wuxian knew his own mind, and his own reasons. He could live with being tainted more than he could live with abandoning those he cared about.

Wei Wuxian began to walk, seeking out a town or village so he could find out what had happened in the world while he'd been in hell.

Wei Wuxian walked until he found a road, then followed it assuming it would lead to a settlement of some kind eventually. The road crossed over a small river, and he took advantage of the water to wash himself off, only imagining what he must look like. He didn't have soap, but the water at least removed the grave soil from his hair and skin. He shook his robes out as best he could, but the black covered any signs of dirt or blood well enough that they would pass at least cursory inspection. Even after washing, though he could still feel the dirt of the Burial

Mounds on his skin. He wondered if he could ever wash it off, or if it had embedded itself deep within him.

He came, as he had hoped, to a small village, which he recognized as being on the road away from Nightless City, just before the road diverged to the road leading to Lotus Pier and another road leading to Cloud Recesses.

Street merchants called out selling their wares. Women with their children walked, heading somewhere with their family. Men discussed business or the weather or whatever it was they deemed important enough to be standing in the streets talking about.

Wei Wuxian observed it, feeling detached from it all. In the past he would have grinned and spoken to the vendors excitedly about their goods, tried some of the sweets offered for sale, maybe even made conversation with some of the prettier girls who caught his eye.

He did none of those things, feeling only a driven sort of focus to find out what had happened to his friends. He knew he would have to speak with someone if he was going to find out if war had broken out between the Wen and Lotus Pier or Cloud Recesses, but the sheer amount of *life* that was happening in the streets around him was too overwhelming. He saw a sign for an inn, and walked towards it. He had always been good at making conversation with innkeepers and other patrons to find out rumors and seek out night hunts. He could still put those skills to use, even if he felt oddly numb and overwhelmed at the moment.

Wei Wuxian could feel eyes on him as he walked. He'd grown up with a face that turned many heads, and a mouth that turned even more. He was used to a certain amount of attention, both good and bad. This was not the same, though. The eyes of some of the men seemed to lock onto him warily, drifting to where a sword would be carried if he were a cultivator and - finding none on Wei Wuxian's hip - frowning and examining him more thoroughly. It seemed as though they could sense that something about Wei Wuxian was dangerous, but he carried the tools of neither a soldier nor a cultivator.

The women watched him, too, but with a different sort of intent. Wei Wuxian was used to the blushing smiles through demurely lowered lashes he'd received in the past. The type of woman who watched him now seemed much more direct. Less harmless flirting, and more actual… offering.

Wei Wuxian didn't stop to speak with any of them, and instead entered the small inn. This would be the best place for news, and he could also get something to eat and possibly a place to rest in a bed, depending on the news he found. If there was active fighting going on, Wei Wuxian would go to the battle directly. But if not, he would need time to gather information.

It would be odd to eat actual food. He couldn't quite tell if his stomach was excited or afraid at the prospect. For once, he only had to make eye contact with the innkeeper before he was immediately shown a table. The innkeeper seemed nervous around Wei Wuxian, as though he didn't know quite what to make of him. But the man knew his job and Wei Wuxian still had his purse (Wen Chao had taken only Wei Wuxian's sword, evidently knowing that a rogue cultivator didn't have much money in his purse). Whatever reservations the innkeeper had about who or what Wei Wuxian might be, it didn't take long for him to share the latest gossip he'd heard. Wei Wuxian learned, with some dismay, that he'd been in the Burial Mounds for almost three

months, and that Cloud Recesses had been attacked by the Wen and everyone was expecting either a second attack on Cloud Recesses or Lotus Pier to be the next target.

“It was strange, though,” the innkeeper said as he picked up the money Wei Wuxian had laid down to pay for his meal. “Everyone knows that QishanWen have the largest army of all the cultivation sects, but Wen Xu and Wen Chao came with only a small force against GusuLan. I guess the town outside of Cloud Recesses was hit hard, since it was mostly civilians, but Cloud Recesses suffered only minor losses.”

One of the other patrons overheard their conversation, and he chimed in. “No, the Wen didn’t come with too small a force. The Lan were just prepared.”

Another man sitting next to him frowned in slight disagreement. “The force was smaller than they should have brought, but from what I heard, the Twin Jades, especially the younger one, fought with unexpected intensity, cutting through the Wen soldiers with a relentlessness that even Nie Mingue would have been impressed by.”

The first man rolled his eyes, clearly disbelieving that any one or two fighters could sway the tide of a battle between two major sects.

“Well, whatever it was, I wish that those cultivators would keep their wars away from the rest of us. I hear that the town outside of Cloud Recesses was nearly burned to the ground when Wen Xu failed to breach the gate right away. He took it out on civilians that were easier to kill.”

Wei Wuxian’s hand clenched around *Chenqing* . The murmured voices in his head getting louder as they picked up on the fear and resentment threading through the men’s words. How many more innocents would the Wen kill? What had happened to Wen Ning, Wen Qing and A-Yuan? Had Lan Xichen kept his promise and protected them, or had the Lans turned on them, knowing they shared the same blood as their attackers?

“What happened to the Wen who attacked?” Wei Wuxian asked, hoping to find out if they were all dead, or had managed to escape, possibly taking captives with them.

The innkeeper shrugged as he brought over a jar of wine and set it on Wei Wuxian’s table with a small cup. “Retreated, from what I heard. Licking their wounds. I’d imagine Wen Ruohan isn’t happy with his sons’ failure. Wen Xu was injured in the attack. Not sure if he lived or not.”

“Any word on the other son?” Wei Wuxian asked.

The innkeeper snorted. “Wen Chao? He’d never dare show his face on the front lines. I heard he was way back behind the forces, and was the first to retreat when the initial attack didn’t go as planned. He’s probably back at some brothel, surrounded by a hundred guards.”

“Guards?” Wei Wuxian queried. The last time he’d seen Wen Chao, the man had had men with him, but that was for a mission. They had been soldiers, not guards.

“Yeah. Heard he’s gone skittish the past few months. GusuLan and YunmengJiang have been asking for information on him, but no one’s seen him.”

Wei Wuxian rubbed the bridge of his nose. Lan Wangji must have gotten his message if the poison had been neutralized enough that the surprise attack hadn’t worked. If the Wen hadn’t

been able to breach the entrance like they'd hoped, the spy had also likely been found. Wei Wuxian smiled slightly. Of course Lan Wangji had been able to figure it all out.

He poured himself a cup of wine, savoring the clean, clear taste of it slowly for a few moments before swallowing it down and pouring himself a second cup. He couldn't afford to have more than one jar, despite the wish to have at least a temporary silence from the memories of the Burial Mounds and the voices that still murmured in his head. There would be time for that later. At the moment, he needed to make a plan for where he would go next.

Spy. Xiangliu toxin had been the only words Wei Wuxian had been able to encode in the butterfly in his weakened condition. He hadn't known if Lan Wangji would understand the implications of it. The state of the butterfly would have made it clear that it wasn't a casual message, so evidently that had been enough for Lan Wangji to take it seriously.

Wei Wuxian breathed a sigh of relief. He might not have been able to keep his promise to come if Cloud Recesses was attacked, but he'd at least been able to give them warning. Lotus Pier was likely also forewarned, since Lan Wangji knew that both clans had been marked as targets.

The innkeeper brought him his meal, and Wei Wuxian ordered a room for the night and a bath. At this village at the crossroads, there would be word if an army was already on the move. He had time to rest, eat, and plan.

The first bite of food was… strange. It felt solid and filling in a way that Wei Wuxian had almost forgotten real food was supposed to.

Without knowing whether Lotus Pier or Cloud Recesses was the next target, it wouldn't make sense to go to either one of those places. He might guess wrong.

No. Wei Wuxian would go to the source of the threat. He would find out where the Wen army was, and see what he could do to weaken the forces or find out their plans. He'd learned many tricks during his time in the Burial Mounds. He was not afraid to beard the lion in its own den.

Wei Wuxian really hoped that Wen Chao wasn't dead, because he had been very much looking forward to seeing the man in person. Wei Wuxian's time in the Burial Mounds had taught him some interesting lessons about what vengeful spirits can do to ones they deem worthy of suffering.

Along that dimension, Wen Chao was imminently worthy. He'd threatened *Shijie* . He'd threatened Wen Qing and Wen Ning. He was going to poison Lotus Pier and Cloud Recesses so he could simply slaughter the cultivators without them being able to put up a fight.

Clearly, the Wen's plan had failed, but Wei Wuxian decided that his next stop would be to collect his sword personally from Wen Chao. He just needed to find him.

With that thought in mind, he stood from his table and asked the innkeeper to direct him to his room.

Wei Wuxian took his time bathing, enjoying both the warm water and the sweet smelling soap. He scrubbed his skin and hair, but he still didn't feel clean. The lantern in the room wasn't very bright, but even by its dim glow, Wei Wuxian could see how much paler his skin had become.

He was thinner, too. Not that he'd ever been particularly bulky, but training in sword cultivation had given him physical strength as well as spiritual. His arms and chest looked thinner now, the bones of his ribs slightly visible.

But physical strength could be built back. What Wei Wuxian worried the most about was his golden core. Had it atrophied the way his muscles had, or would it simply refill to be as strong as it ever was? He could feel the Yang energy returning to him, so at least he didn't have to worry that it wouldn't come back at all. But right now his body was so full of the Yin energy he'd absorbed in the Burial Mounds that he didn't try to access his core. He had no need to at the moment, and the reserves he'd absorbed from the Burial Mounds were so much larger than any single cultivator's golden core. He was holding it all in, keeping it ready for when he found Wen Chao.

Once he'd purged himself of the resentful energy he was holding, unleashing it on Wen Chao, he could focus on testing out his golden core and see if there had been any change. Lan Qiren had given many dire warnings about any who traveled down the dark path of cultivating resentful energy, but there hadn't been a lot of specifics given. Wei Wuxian would have to find out on his own what the cost of his new power would be.

He wasn't foolish enough to think it would come without cost. That wasn't how power worked. But he would take it as it came.

He used the bath water to wash his robes. The black had hidden most of the dirt, but Wei Wuxian could feel it in the fabric.

He tied the bath cloth around his waist and hung his robes to dry on the small rail of the balcony off his room. The thin inner robe would likely dry within an hour, but the outer robe that Lan Wangji had given him was thicker and of very high quality. The night was cool, but there was a good breeze so even the thick robe would dry before morning. Wei Wuxian fingered the fabric, wondering how the man who gifted it to him was doing. Had he been injured in battle at Cloud Recesses? Was he busy rebuilding what the Wen had destroyed, or was he out hunting them like Wei Wuxian?

He wondered what Lan Wangji would think of him when he saw him next. Lan Wangji had looked askance at Wei Wuxian for simply knowing how to make a symbol of resentful energy visible. What would he say now that Wei Wuxian was actively cultivating it?

The thought twisted somewhat in his stomach, and he scoffed in annoyance of his own reaction. What did it matter what Hanguang-Jun thought of him? Wei Wuxian was doing what had to be done. He didn't need permission or approval from others. He knew his own mind, and his own morality.

He brought Chenquing to his lips and played, calling forth the spirit of the courtesan and child he'd brought with him from the Burial Mounds.

Be my eyes. Search for me. Is there an army nearby? Where is Wen Chao?

He felt their energy snap and spike at the name he'd given them to hunt. They would go as far as they could while still being tied to Wei Wuxian. If Wen Chao was too far away from the Inn, Wei Wuxian would have to go into Qishan territory to continue the search.

He played for a bit more, further strengthening the tie with the two spirits. When he was satisfied that they would be able to carry out their search without losing focus and attacking others, Wei Wuxian set *Chenqing* down on the nightstand. He removed the bath cloth, feeling somewhat exposed as he slid between the slightly scratchy sheets of the bed without anything on. His lips twitched briefly as he imagined how scandalized Lan Wangji would be at such an act. The man was always so prim and proper.

But Wei Wuxian was too happy to be finally clean, and finally able to sleep in an actual bed to think too much more about it. His eyes were closed before his head even touched the pillow. His sleep was filled with the sounds of screams and the images of the dead, but his body was too hungry for rest to allow Wei Wuxian to wake before morning came.

The two spirits were waiting for him when he woke.

They had found Wen Chao. He was on the very edge of where the spirits had been able to go, about midway between the town they were currently in and Nightless City.

Wei Wuxian stood up from his bed and stretched, then pulled on his robes. He had no interest in breakfast.

It was time to go and thank Wen Chao personally for giving him the power he now wielded. And what better way to thank the man than by showing him *exactly* how his new form of cultivation worked.

As he left the inn, he didn't notice the way the man's eyes followed him, nor did he see the letter he immediately began writing when Wei Wuxian headed out of town on the road that led back towards Nightless City.

To be continued...

A/N - Lan Zhan will be in the next chapter in person, I promise!!!

Chapter 10: Reunions

A/N - sorry I am late replying to some of the comments. I am having a slow motion nervous breakdown in advance of elections here. I had planned on having this chapter up on wwx's birthday but like... I could not focus enough to do proper proofreading for a while and I didn't want to post total garbage, so here we are.

Trigger warnings - Wen Chao's existence and wwx's revenge, in canon-typical detail. I am less into writing gore so probably not even as triggering as canon? idk. If the cannon Wen Chao scene triggered you, maybe skip the rest of the chapter after the line breaker in the middle.

The two spirits Wei Wuxian had brought with him from the Burial Mounds guided him to a village that was about halfway between the town he had been staying at and Nightless City. He had heard rumors that the Wen army had taken over towns between them and other sect territories to act as both outposts and fallback positions for any future attacks, after their failure at Cloud Recesses. They no longer needed to worry about trying to keep the element of surprise, so their tactics had shifted to ones more suited to leveraging their core asset, which was the size of their army and coffers. It wasn't clear how many such encampments they had, nor exactly what the size of their army was, but Wei Wuxian would work on finding out such details later.

His first priority was to get his sword back from Wen Chao, and find out if any of his friends had been captured in the raid on Cloud Recesses. His golden core had been rapidly replenishing ever since he had emerged from the oppressive Yin energy of the Burial Mounds. Once he had his sword, he would be ready to fight for Lotus Pier or Cloud Recesses, whichever was the Wen's next target. Once he joined up with other cultivators, would use Yang energy if he could. Yin energy if he must.

For the moment, though, his body was pulsing with Yin energy and he was on his own.

The night was still, and the moon was only a small crescent. Wei Wuxian moved through the trees silently as he approached the occupied village from away from the road. He was still far enough away that none of the sentries in the towers had seen him. The moon was only a sliver in the sky, not providing much light to the deeply shadowed woods, but there were watch fires lit around the entrance to the village. Anyone who approached was likely to be spotted, no matter how silently they moved.

It didn't matter. Wei Wuxian wasn't afraid of discovery.

He flexed his fingers, feeling the resentful energy surge through him, flooding his spiritual pathways with a sheer force of power unlike anything his own golden core could ever have produced. His robes ruffled slightly despite no breeze to press against them. Wei Wuxian was *brimming* with power. It really wouldn't matter if there were fifty soldiers or five hundred. He had no fear of the men in the camp, nor of anything that hid in the shadows surrounding. Wei Wuxian wouldn't even need to use the seal that pulsed at his hip.

It was an odd feeling to know with absolute certainty that - of all the things that could lurk in the shadows, all the cultivators of unknown strength and skill inside the camp - there was nothing

more dangerous than himself.

The dark energy he had absorbed was so much more than any individual golden core could provide. And - perhaps even more importantly - he had learned how resentful energy worked, what it responded to, and what it could do when properly guided while trapped within the depths of the Burial Mounds.

It had changed Wei Wuxian, metamorphosing him into a creature unlike any that had been seen before.

Wen Chao and his soldiers were used to being the predators, killing innocent civilians for sport, attacking other cultivators without warning or honor. Wei Wuxian could hear the stories of the spirits of the dead whispering in his mind, and he could feel the truth of their experiences.

Tonight, Wen Chao would be the prey, rather than the predator.

Those he had hunted down and killed would now turn the tables on him. It was the least Wei Wuxian could do to repay the spirits of the Burial Mounds for his survival. He played *Chenqing* softly, and a dark mist of resentful spiritual energy flowed from the flute and seeped out of Wei Wuxian's very skin, wrapping around his body like a cloak. He would be invisible to the guards, indiscernible from the darkness of the shadows of the night until he chose otherwise.

He wanted to take his time in this, his first battle since his transformation.

Wei Wuxian moved easily past the guards, walking through the compound with unhurried strides. From what he could tell, the civilians who had lived there had already been driven out or killed. There would be no shortage of resentful corpses to help him should he need more than the two vengeful spirits already accompanying him.

Wei Wuxian paused to examine a talisman that had been attached to one of the lamp posts, nothing that there were many identical talismans around the compound. It was a basic charm to repel evil spirits. Evidently the Wen soldiers here were aware that their actions were creating resentful energy wherever they went. So they used these seals to keep themselves from having to face the consequences of their actions.

Fucking cowards.

Murmurs of approval of that sentiment whispered through his mind, and Wuxian's lips curved into a dark smile as he brushed his fingertips over the paper. Yin energy he'd absorbed into his body flowed easily from his fingertips with a red glow, neutralizing the Yang energy that the seal had been set with, wiping the talisman paper blank. He traced a new set of symbols over the paper. The new symbols would attract spirits who had been wronged by those living here. He infused the talisman with strong resentful energy. It would do more than simply attract spirits. Spirits who were drawn here would additionally be able to pull power from Wei Wuxian's seal, making them even more powerful.

Satisfied with his work, Wei Wuxian continued his walk around the compound, changing the seals on every protection talisman he came across.

It would be a night of reckoning for the living, where the dead would have their revenge.

He had only finished about two thirds of the talismans when he heard the first scream. He paused, looking dispassionately as one of the guards appeared to be screaming and fighting something that no one else could see. His comrades look at him as though he were crazy.

“What the fuck! Stop swinging your sword around! Are you drunk?!” One of the other guards asked him.

The man didn’t hear him, he continued to shout at whatever spirit had sought him out.

Wei Wuxian closed his eyes, letting the voice of the spirit float through his head. The spirit was one who had been a villager here, and had begged for his life to be spared, offering to leave his home peacefully if they would just allow him to live.

The guard had cut him down where he stood, then moved into the man’s home.

Wei Wuxian ignored the screams as he continued his task. By the time he had changed the last talisman, more than fifty soldiers were either screaming or dead. He experienced the stories of each spirit as they entered the area, drawing from the energy Wei Wuxian had imbued his altered talismans with. He felt his own anger building, his mind sometimes unable to differentiate between his own memories and those playing out before him.

There was a large, well-appointed inn in the center of town. Wei Wuxian knew from the spirits that Wen Chao and his mistress were inside. The spirit of the courtesan and the abandoned child had found him almost immediately, but Wei Wuxian had held them back.

Wen Chao would answer to Wei Wuxian before he would be allowed to escape in death.

“Don’t kill him. I have things to ask him first,” Wei Wuxian told his spirit companions. The talismans he’d altered were doing their work, as more spirits and resentful energy poured into the village. He continued to play his flute, letting the resentful energy he had absorbed from the spirits of the Burial Mounds out to seek its revenge.

The cultivators might not be able to see him, but they could hear the sound of his flute. He heard fearful cries across the courtyard as more and more people raced outside to try to find the source of the strange attack.

“Where is the flute coming from?”

“Who’s playing it?”

“Is it a ghost?”

“What’s happening!”

Wei Wuxian allowed the shadows to dissipate from his body, revealing himself. He had done what he needed to do to the town, and he had located Wen Chao. Several cultivators saw him appear, but they were all engaged in their individual battles with their personal demons. They would not survive those battles long enough to pose any danger to Wei Wuxian.

The screams of the dying surrounded him, and the courtyard began to flow with blood as he turned and began walking towards the building where he knew Wen Chao was hiding.

Two young cultivators stood, watching their comrades fall with expressions of fear and horror. Wei Wuxian played *Chenqing* , questioning the spirits about the two cultivators, but none of them had been wronged by the two youths that were left untouched.

Wei Wuxian walked towards them. He made no effort to conceal himself, but his movements had always been silent and the boys were transfixed by the scene playing out in gruesome detail in front of them. He could see them trembling, gripping their swords tightly, but with nothing solid to fight against.

Tilting his head to the side, Wei Wuxian considered the two young cultivators. Letting them go would make things difficult for him, if they report what they've seen here. But he also had no interest in killing anyone who hadn't earned it.

"Who are you!" One of the youths shouted, finally having spotted Wei Wuxian. Both scrambled to raise their swords to defend themselves or attack, though their hands shook.

Wei Wuxian chuckled as he continued his slow, deliberate approach.

"Do you really think you'd still be living if I wanted you dead?" Wei Wuxian asked, ignoring their swords as he circled around them, his hands clasped behind his back, holding *Chenqing* loosely in his grasp.

He could hear their rapid breathing and felt their eyes locked on him as they turned to keep him always in front of them, their swords acting as a ridiculous barrier to protect them.

The young cultivators exchanged glances, not knowing how to respond to his question.

"Look around you," Wei Wuxian gestured to the courtyard and walls, where the majority of Wen Chao's men lay dead or dying. "If I can kill them all without even raising a sword, how do you think either of you could fight me?"

The two Wen soldiers swallowed visibly, then slowly lowered their swords.

"Who are you?" The one who had asked the question earlier repeated it, but his tone was now less 'panicked aggression' and had become more 'awestruck fear'.

Wei Wuxian shrugged. "I am no one important. Just one of the many people your master decided to kill and leave for dead."

There was a flush of guilt in the eyes of both youths, and Wei Wuxian was glad he had not killed them without speaking with them first. They still had their conscience. They deserved a chance.

"Why… why aren't we dead yet?" the smaller of the two asked. His voice shaking and slightly choked with tears he was valiantly trying to hold back.

"Mm," Wei Wuxian replied, rubbing the bridge of his nose as though giving the question thoughtful consideration. "I don't kill people who don't deserve it."

The two exchanged a look again, not sure how to read his words... not sure if this meant Wei Wuxian was actually going to let them live or if he was just delivering a final message before he killed them.

“As far as I know, neither of you have killed someone outside of fair battle.”

They both nodded.

“Then you may leave,” Wei Wuxian said, gesturing towards the village gate.

The boys looked at the gate, and the bodies strewn between them and freedom. Then they looked back at Wei Wuxian.

“R-really?” The taller one asked.

Wei Wuxian shrugged. “If you didn’t do anything wrong, why should I kill you?”

They both drew a shaky breath, then dropped to their knees and kowtowed to him. “Thank you, *Laozu* ,” they said reverently.

“Get going,” Wei Wuxian prodded, not sure what to make of their behavior or their title. The two stumbled to their feet, bowing one final time before turning and walking (though with rapidly increasing speed) towards the gate.

“But,” Wei Wuxian’s voice was not loud, but it carried like an arrow to where the two Wen cultivators were now nearly running to escape, freezing them in their tracks. They slowly turned to face him. “Next time, choose your master more carefully.”

“Yes, *Laozu* !” They nodded frantically, then gave up all pretense of leaving with dignity and sprinted towards the gate, disappearing out into the darkness. Wei Wuxian gave a bemused look at the name they’d given him, then shrugged it off to focus on the task still at hand.

The village was now almost completely silent, save for screams and shrieks coming from the inn at the center of the village.

The entire battalion was dead.

All that was left was to deal with its commander, and retrieve his sword.

With that, Wei Wuxian turned and headed towards the sound of the screaming.

Seeing the memories of the dead flash through his mind as the Wen cultivators died around him had already stirred up Wei Wuxian’s emotions. He felt the righteous anger, the cleansing violence, but it was still one degree removed from his own emotions. He had no doubt that the cultivators who had died tonight had deserved it, but he had only been the vehicle for that vengeance. The emotions he had felt about those deaths were nothing compared to the feelings building in him as he walked up the steps to the room where Wen Chao was hiding.

This was the man who had plotted to poison both Lotus Pier and Cloud Recesses so the cultivators would be disabled before they even attacked.

This was the man who was using the threat of attacking Cloud Recesses to try to pressure Lan Wangji into being his cultivation partner.

This was the man who had threatened to rape Wen Qing and harm Wen Ning and A-Yuan.

This was the man who had threatened to "find some use" for *Shijie* .

Despite the calm of the evening air around the village, a dark wind whipped up around Wei Wuxian, his robes billowing out and his hair streaming out around him. He walked with a measured gate, feeling no need to rush. He had allowed the other cultivators to die relatively quickly, but he would take his time with Wen Chao.

Wei Wuxian ran his fingers over *Chenqing's* smooth, cool surface as he took in the scene before him. The two spirits he had brought with him from the Burial Mounds had manifested into physical form. The courtesan, her once beautiful face showing as a gruesome, disfigured corpse stood over the body of a woman. Wei Wuxian caught flickers of memories of the dead woman burning a brand into the courtesan's face. The memory was sharp, the feel of the burning pain as the hot metal scorched into her flesh, the scent of charred skin, the fear of what would happen to her now as she was cast out with nowhere to go, her family dead.

There was a man, presumably Wen Chao's personal body guard. He was not quite dead, though his torso appeared to have been cut open and a hollow carved out just below his heart. Wei Wuxian wondered who the man had killed, and how, that this was the end he met.

Before he could let his mind seek the answer from the spirits around him, a high-pitched shriek had Wei Wuxian turning towards the room's remaining occupant. Wen Chao cowered in the far corner of the room, his ostentatious red robes torn and blood-soaked and he was clutching them oddly around himself. It took Wei Wuxian a moment to realize that the blood was not coming from wounds to his torso, but rather from his hands, where several of his fingers appeared to have been bitten off. There was another gash on one of his exposed legs, where another bite of flesh had been torn from his body.

The body of the small child had manifested, and the fierce ghost had evidently eaten pieces of Wen Chao's flesh. Wei Wuxian did not flinch from the sight. He had felt the child's pain and endless hunger, the anguish of the child having watched her parents killed right in front of her, and then being left alone to starve. The desperate hunger was being sated now, on the flesh of the person who had caused it.

Wei Wuxian knew all about the hunger of a starving child. He'd been slightly older than the ghoul child when his parents had died, but he remembered the clawing fear, desperately fighting for food from the wild dogs that attacked him for it. He'd survived long enough to have been rescued by Jiang Fengmian, but he would never take food for granted again.

It took Wen Chao a moment to realize that there was someone else in the room with him. His eyes were latched onto the child that was sitting under the table, chewing on what appeared to be one of Wen Chao's fingers. When his gaze finally flickered up and registered Wei Wuxian's presence, Wen Chao's eyes bulged in terror and he made a high-pitched whine.

"You! No! It… you're dead! You can't come back!" Wen Chao babbled, pressing himself against the wall and hunching his shoulders, trying to make himself smaller.

As though that would save him.

Wei Wuxian hummed impassively. “Mm. Didn’t I tell you that I’d come back for you as a fierce ghost if you killed me?”

“But… I threw you into the Burial Mounds!” Wen Chao shouted frantically. “Nothing comes out of there! Not even souls! You can’t be here! You shouldn’t be here! Wen Zhuliu! Father! Help me!”

Wei Wuxian’s gaze flickered to where the bodyguard - presumably named Wen Zhuliu since he knew for a fact that it wasn’t Wen Ruohan - lay bleeding out.

“I don’t think your guard dog is in any state to help you.”

A sound from behind him had Wei Wuxian turning towards the open door to the chamber. He registered the flowing white robes before his head had even completed turning.

Lan Wangji stood in the doorway.

His face and body was frozen into utter stillness, but there was no misreading the look of shocked recognition that was in Lan Wangji’s eyes as they locked on Wei Wuxian. They stood there for a suspended moment, neither able to so much as breathe as they took each other in. After months of the dirt, darkness and despair of the Burial Mounds, it was almost more than Wei Wuxian could bear to look at the purity that was Lan Wangji. But Wei Wuxian could not tear his eyes away. Lan Wangji was as flawlessly poised as ever, hair and robes practically glowing with pristine purity, despite having just walked through a bloody battlefield. Lan Wangji embodied the opposite of everything Wei Wuxian had experienced during the past three months.

The sight soothed something deep in Wei Wuxian’s soul, even as it tore at it.

Wei Wuxian could feel every grain of grave soil that had touched him in the Burial Mounds, the darkness of it pressing even harder against his soul as he looked upon Lan Wangji. Wei Wuxian had gone far beyond anything that the Lans would accept in terms of interacting with resentful energy. He didn’t suppress it, he didn’t just study it. Wei Wuxian embraced it, consumed it, and controlled it.

“ *Wei Ying* .” Lan Wangji’s voice was low, almost constricted.

It almost sounded as if Lan Wangji’s throat was choked with emotion at seeing Wei Wuxian, but it was more likely that Hanguang-Jun was simply horrified at the sight of what was occurring in the room before him. And what he already must have passed in the village on his way here. As much as Wei Wuxian was drinking in Lan Wangji’s purity, Lan Wangji was probably equally taking in Wei Wuxian’s darkness.

He felt his stomach clench. He had known he would have to face Lan Wangji eventually. There would be no possibility of keeping a secret of this size from the cultivation world, especially not during war where everyone would be fighting with all they had. But he had hoped he would be able to explain at least some of it. Maybe, somewhere in the back of his mind, Wei Wuxian had hoped his secret might have come out in some heroic moment where he saved Cloud Recesses or Lotus Pier and Lan Zhan and Jiang Cheng found out *then* , when they would be in a better state of mind to see what Wei Ying had become.

Wei Wuxian's lips twisted into a grim smile. The flash of shock had gone from Lan Wangji's golden eyes, and they were now unreadable as they studied Wei Wuxian. It was just his luck that Lan Wangji had to discover Wei Wuxian's new abilities as he stood in the middle of a village of corpses of cultivators who were not currently attacking anyone.

A flash of black drew Wei Wuxian's attention to Lan Wangji's hip. Wei Wuxian's eyes widened as he recognized the sword that hung there, side-by-side with *Bichen* .

" *Suibian* ?" Wei Wuxian asked, unable to even guess how Lan Wangji had ended up with the sword that Wen Chao had taken from him before throwing him into the Burial Mounds.

Before Lan Wangji could answer, there was a flicker of movement behind them. Wei Wuxian turned to find Wen Chao trying to creep along the floor towards an open window. The ghoul child had been watching, though, and was already intercepting him from his path.

Wen Chao screamed and scuttled back to his corner while the child crept closer.

"Keep him in his place," Wei Wuxian said to the child.

"Wei Ying. What is this?" Lan Wangji asked, his voice tense.

There was no mistaking the fact that both the child and the courtesan were following Wei Wuxian's orders. A cultivator would not need to be as brilliant as Lan Wangji was to understand the implications.

Wei Wuxian met Lan Wangji's gaze. He knew Lan Wangji's position on demonic cultivation. He'd had no objections when Wei Wuxian had been expelled from Cloud Recesses for merely discussing it.

"It doesn't concern you, Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian said, a dark edge in his voice even to his own ears.

Lan Wangji's expression stilled even further, but they were interrupted this time by the arrival of Jiang Cheng, who burst through the doorway behind Lan Wangji, then stilled when he saw Wei Wuxian standing there.

Unlike Lan Wangji, Jiang Cheng's face was filled with emotions that Wei Wuxian had no difficulty reading. Shock. Relief. Joy. Confusion.

"Wei Wuxian. What the fuck! You're alive?! Where the fuck have you been! Do you know how worried we were? What were you thinking!" Jiang Cheng shouted, taking a step forward before abruptly stopping again. His eyes narrowed as he looked more closely at Wei Wuxian, and the two fierce ghosts in the room, one of which was standing tightly to Wei Wuxian's side.

"What… what happened to you?" Jiang Cheng asked. Wei Wuxian could almost see the calculations going through his mind. All the dead Wen cultivators, and only Wei Wuxian alive with Wen Chao bleeding at his feet.

He wasn't sure how to respond to Jiang Cheng's question. But he was spared the trouble when Lan Wangji answered for him.

“Wen Chao threw him in the Burial Mounds,” Lan Wangji said, a hard edge of anger coloring his words unlike anything Wei Wuxian had heard from the stoic man before. “He was screaming it when I entered.”

Jiang Cheng’s face went pale, and he looked at Wei Wuxian almost with desperation before his face transformed with killing rage as he turned to face Wen Chao.

“What. Did. You. Do. To. My. *Brother!* ” Jiang Cheng’s voice was deadly, his words cutting through the air in the room like a whip.

To be continued...

A/N - I always wished that lwj and jc found out about the burial mounds earlier, and I knew that wwx wouldn't tell about it because he wouldn't want them to worry, so I made Wen Chao do the work for him. I think it would have changed things a lot. We are going to find out!

Chapter 11: Revenge

Warnings: graphic depictions of violence. Continuation of Wen Chao scene. Flashback to physical abuse by Madam Yu.

Sorry I am late with this. All the political drama going on in my country is making me slowly lose my mind. So here is some escapism!!

"What. Did. You. Do. To. My. Brother! " Jiang Cheng's voice was deadly, his words cutting through the air in the room like a whip.

Wei Wuxian had heard that particular tone of voice from Jiang Cheng directed at himself many times. It had been a very long time since he had heard it directed at someone else on his behalf.

"Jiang Cheng?" Wei Wuxian was trying to make sense of how Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng both happened to be *here* and *together* and Jiang Cheng had just called him *brother* , and Madam Yu had made it clear three years ago that Wei Wuxian was no one's brother -

. . . . . .

"How dare you jeopardize the relations between us and LanglingJin and GusuLan," Madam Yu had spat at Wei Wuxian when he had arrived back at Lotus Pier after being expelled from Cloud Recesses. She had been waiting at the dock, Zidian already unleashed. Wei Wuxian was used to her punishments, and had slid the outer robe off his back without comment, kneeling at the entrance of Lotus Pier. The first lash struck almost before his knees had fully settled on the ground.

"You've never brought anything but difficulty to our sect. I'd hoped we could maybe one day at least marry you off and form some sort of minor political alliance, but with your behavior, we can't even do that. You're utterly worthless. We took you in and trained you and fed you and all you do is bring shame down upon our house."

Another lash cut across his back.

"You are not just a failure as a ward, but you're a failure as a brother to Jiang Cheng. You have never been anything but an obstacle to him, stealing attention he deserved from his own father. You think it's a joke when he tells you what a burden you are? You always pretend like he's joking or doesn't mean it. But he means every word. Your actions make everything difficult for him. By always showing off and offending people, you undermine his chances for recognition."

A third lash. Wei Wuxian's vision began to swim. Three was usually the limit, but Madam Yu didn't seem to be stopping.

"Jiang Fengmian was a fool to take you in and name you First Disciple."

Another lash, this one deeper than the others, and Wei Wuxian's vision went dark. He clung to consciousness, but only barely, his hands braced on the rough boards of the entryway as he sucked in air. If Madam Yu used the whip again, there was no way he could remain conscious.

He wasn't sure he would fully heal, if she kept going. But it turned out, she didn't need to use her weapon to land a near-fatal blow.

"But he can't argue with me on this. You have offended both GusuLan and LanlingJin. We can't afford to lose allies in the current political climate, and he knows it. Why do you think he's not even here to greet you? None of them are! YungmengJiang took you in because of guilt and obligation, but you've gone too far. And as usual, I'm the one left to clean up the mess. Don't bother returning to your room. It has already been emptied. Take what you brought with you to Gusu and leave. You are no longer welcome in YunmengJiang lands."

Wei Wuxian didn't have much memory of staggering away from Lotus Pier. He lost consciousness somewhere in the woods away from the eyes of others. Her words hadn't come as a surprise. He'd known his presence had only caused tension in his sect. He'd heard the whispers. It had only ever been a matter of time.

. . . . .

The spiritual energy from the Burial Mounds surged at the combination of Jiang Cheng's anger and Wei Wuxian's memories. It couldn't differentiate between a threat to Wen Chao and a threat to Wei Wuxian, and dark wisps of power flowed from Wei Wuxian's pores, his feelings of anguish and betrayal from the past escalating and merging with those of the spirits until he couldn't tell which were his thoughts and which were those of others long dead.

Wen Chao moaned in terror as Wei Wuxian's robes billowed out around him in the otherwise still room. The ghoul child turned and growled at Jiang Cheng. The courtesan spirit, who had finished watching over Wen Zhuliu's final breaths, shifted closer to Wei Wuxian, resting her hand on his elbow. She shifted her appearance back to her youthful, living self, pressing up against Wei Wuxian's side. He could feel her fear spiking and it brought him back to his senses somewhat. Confronting Wen Chao and his mistress had brought her death and shame back full force, and her spirit was in turmoil. He stroked her hair, the way he knew her mother had done when she was alive. Most spirits didn't have full cognition the way the living did. They mostly had a few sets of memory imprints, whether good or bad, and the emotions surrounding them. He couldn't speak to her and explain who Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng were to him, but he could reassure her in other ways.

"They won't harm you," Wei Wuxian said to both the ghoul child and the courtesan spirit. Given that both Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng put down vengeful spirits on a regular basis, it wasn't a claim Wei Wuxian could normally make, but he was strong enough in his new powers to ensure it would be true.

Lan Wangji's eyes narrowed, locked on to where the courtesan spirit's hand rested on Wei Wuxian's arm and Wei Wuxian's fingers brushed against her hair. He stepped forward, his hand closing around the sheath of *Bichen* .

" *Wei Ying* ," Lan Wangji said again, this time with a harder edge to his voice.

Wei Wuxian could not look at Lan Wangji and see judgement in the man's eyes. He wasn't ready. He'd only been not basically dead for just a couple of days. The man who'd threatened the people he cared about and tried to kill him was bleeding on the floor in front of him and the voices in Wei Wuxian's head were clamoring for his blood. Wei Wuxian couldn't handle trying

to talk to Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng right then. He needed them all to stay focused on the task at hand, which was making sure Wen Chao paid for what he'd done, and what he'd tried to do.

"Jiang Cheng. Is *Shijie* safe?" Wei Wuxian asked, turning to face Wen Chao. Mentioning their sister was one of the only things that could snap Jiang Cheng out of a rage.

"What the fuck, Wei Wuxian! Why wouldn't *JieJie* be -," Jiang Cheng cut off as he looked between Wei Wuxian's face and Wen Chao. "Did that Wen dog *threaten* her?!"

Zidian fully activated in under a second, and Jiang Cheng took an aggressive step towards Wen Chao.

Wei Wuxian drew a breath, wondering briefly how Jiang Cheng came to be wielding Madam Yu's weapon. He assumed he would have heard of her death if it had happened. He would ask Jiang Cheng about it later, if the man was still speaking with him.

He wasn't able to think much more about it as he continued to struggle against the chaos in his mind to focus on the reality around him, not the memories of the dead clamoring for his attention. He felt a hand grip his forearm, and opened his eyes to see Lan Wangji standing where the courtesan had been, his hand wrapped around Wei Wuxian's arm over the fabric of the robes he had gifted him many months ago. The courtesan spirit seemed to be able to sense Lan Wangji's depth of spiritual prowess, as she had stepped back, out of his reach.

Wei Wuxian felt his mind steady slightly as he met Lan Wangji's intense gaze. The resentful energy surging through Wei Wuxian didn't fully dissipate, but it was no longer on the precipice of raging out of his control. Wei Wuxian turned to face Jiang Cheng, who was holding a sparking *Zidian* and glaring fiercely at Wen Chao's cowering figure.

"He said that if Lan Zhan refused his offer to be his cultivation partner, they would burn Cloud Recesses to the ground and he would take Wen Qing instead. After he poisoned both Lotus Pier and Cloud Recesses with the *Xiangliu's* venom, he said he'd… *'find some use'* for *Shijie* because her core wasn't strong enough for a cultivation partner."

Zidian arced before Wei Wuxian had even finished speaking, striking Wen Chao across his face and chest before the man could even get his arms up to protect himself. Wei wuxian knew his brother well enough to know that Wen Chao wasn't going to survive the next thirty seconds unless Wei Wuxian slowed Jiang Cheng's tendency to strike first and ask questions later. Evidently, he was not the only one in the room who knew this about the man.

"Do not finish him," Lan Wangji said sharply at Jiang Cheng, not releasing Wei Wuxian's arm.

"Why the fuck not!" Jiang Cheng said, already raising *Zidian* for another strike.

"Because the *Xiangliu* might not have been Wen Ruohan's only plan," Lan Wangji replied, his voice unshakeable and solid. Wei Wuxian got the sense that this was not the first time Lan Wangji had needed to talk Jiang Cheng down from taking rash action, and he wondered at it.

Jiang Cheng's fist clenched, and it took a visible effort for him to not deliver a second blow to the now semi-unconscious Wen Chao. The ghoul child and the courtesan spirit both cowered from the sight of the purple lightning as the entire room froze, waiting to see what would happen next.

“He doesn’t get to die that quickly,” Wei Wuxian said, his eyes fixed on Wen Chao’s groaning form. He could feel the warm, solid pressure of Lan Wangji’s fingers still gripping his arm. It struck him that this was the first time he’d been touched by a living creature in over three months.

He forced himself to not lean into the touch. Or, more accurately, he stopped doing it once he caught himself. There was still one important question he needed to ask.

“Wen Chao. He knew about Wen Ning and A-Yuan, and he…”

Wei Wuxian couldn’t quite force the words out to ask about them, but Lan Wangji answered anyway.

“They are safe. Brother protected them.” Lan Wangji’s fingers tightened fractionally around Wei Wuxian’s arm.

Wei Wuxian had no idea why the gesture felt safe when it should have felt restraining. Nothing that had gripped his body recently had been anything even remotely safe, and Lan Wangji had already expressed his opinion about the new abilities that Wei Wuxian had unleashed on the Wen garrison.

He forced himself to step away from Lan Wangji and break the physical connection. Lan Wangji did not try to restrain him, but there was a flash of… something in the man’s eyes that Wei Wuxian did not know how to read.

He turned his focus instead on Wen Chao.

“You already know I’m going to kill you,” Wei Wuxian spoke calmly, as though his words were of no import. “And no one is going to come to save you.”

Wen Chao’s eyes flickered between the ghoul child, Jiang Cheng, and Wei Wuxian. It was hard to tell which sight terrified him more.

“The only question is how fast I kill you.”

Wei Wuxian heard a soft rustle of silk from behind him.

“Lan Zhan. I think it’s best if you step outside,” Wei Wuxian said. Jiang Cheng’s blood ran hot the same way Wei Wuxian’s did. His former brother might not approve of how Wei Wuxian was going to do it, but he would not stand in his way. Lan Wangji was different. He was too pure and too noble to participate in something as low as revenge. He should not see what was going to happen next. Wei Wuxian knew that Lan Wangji had no trouble killing an enemy in battle. But torturing one for information? He could not fathom Lan Wangji condoning it, much less participating in it. He was too pure. Too good for such things.

Jiang Cheng did not take his eyes from Wen Chao, but he gave a sharp nod.

“The Jiang Sect will deal with this,” Jiang Cheng stated, evidently coming to the same conclusion.

Wen Chao was stupid, but even he was able to grasp the implications of Lan Wangji being dismissed from the room. His eyes flared wide with panic, and he scrambled on his bloody hands and knees towards Lan Wangji. Wei Wuxian was unprepared for the flood of possessive rage that surged through his body as Wen Chao reached out towards Lan Wangji. Wen Chao was utterly unfit to touch even the hem of Lan Wangji's robes.

"Please! Hanguang-Jun!" Wen Chao begged.

Wei Wuxian's boot caught Wen Chao in the chest before he could grasp at the pristine white robes that floated around Lan Wangji's feet, and he shoved him back crashing into the wall.

"Do not *touch him!"* Wei Wuxian growled out. Wen Chao had threatened Lan Wangji with the destruction of Cloud Recesses if he didn't agree to be his cultivation partner. Lan Wangji had refused, but the fact that Wen Chao even *considered* that he was worthy of being a cultivation partner to Lan Wangji set Wei Wuxian's blood on fire. "You are not worthy to address him."

He wasn't even conscious of it happening, but dark tendrils of resentful energy surged from his skin, coiling around Wen Chao's body with a crushing, suffocating intent. He could feel the frantic beat of Wen Chao's heart, the shallow gasping of his lungs. Wei Wuxian clenched his fist and felt the coils of resentful energy squeeze even tighter, the voices in his head building in excitement as image after image of Wen Chao's deeds flickered through his mind.

Kill him.

He deserves to die.

End it.

He killed us.

He enjoyed it.

He'll do it again.

He could feel Wen Chao's heartbeat getting weaker, and he clenched his fist even tighter.

He tried to take a step forward, closer to his prey, but found he could not. Two sets of hands gripped his arms. Voices that were not inside his head were calling his name, coming to him as if he were under water.

Or still deep inside the Burial Mounds.

"-ei Ying. *Wei Ying* !" Lan Zhan's voice.

"- thought you said you didn't want to kill him right away!" Jiang Cheng's voice.

Wei Wuxian blinked, Wen Chao's purpling face coming into focus.

That's right. We need to find out what Wen Ruohan plans to do next. If Wen Chao knows, I can try to prevent it. If I kill Wen Chao now, then… we can't find out and innocent people will die .

Wei Wuxian forced his fist to unclench, drawing on every ounce of willpower he had. He could feel his hands shaking. There was a wetness on his upper lip. He wiped it, and saw that it was blood.

"Wei Ying," Lan Zhan was standing in front of him, staring at him with concern. There was not even a flicker of fear in the man's eyes as he looked at Wei Wuxian, and Wei Wuxian wondered how that was even possible. "What happened?"

Wei Wuxian wiped the blood from his hand onto his robes. There wasn't very much of it, and the bleeding seemed to already be stopping.

Jiang Cheng was looking at him with wide eyes, and Wei Wuxian could see both fear and determination in his former brother's expression. Which was probably fair. Wei Wuxian had not seen himself in a mirror in many months, but he could guess what he looked like, with his skin unnaturally pale, his body so much thinner, his eyes burning with the red glow he had seen reflecting off the opaque darkness in the Burial Mounds.

He might not be dead, but he was surely no longer fully human.

"You should both leave now," Wei Wuxian said, not looking at either man as he shrugged out of their grip. He couldn't have them here, watching him. Judging him. Wei Wuxian was not the man they had known before, and even *that* version of himself had been unacceptable by them and their clans.

"No," two voices said in unison, one loud and harsh, one quiet but firm.

To Wei Wuxian's knowledge, this was the first time he had ever heard Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng agree on something, much less speak the same word at the same time.

Of course, it had to happen when they were disagreeing with what Wei Wuxian was asking.

"I won't let you stop me," Wei Wuxian said quietly after a moment, looking at Lan Wangji. "If you want Wen Chao spared. It isn't going to happen."

Jiang Cheng huffed. "Stop you? Mother gave me *Zidian* when she learned I was searching for him. I'll be fighting you to be the one who ends him. He tried to poison Lotus Pier so he could attack us without defense. He threatened *JieJie* . He tried to *kill my brother.* "

Wei Wuxian flinched, then looked deliberately at Jiang Cheng. "I am no longer a member of the Jiang sect."

Jiang Cheng's jaw clenched. "You're not a member of the Lan sect, either. But you fought with Hanguang-Jun. What, I'm not good enough to fight with you anymore? You'll fight beside him, but not me?!"

Jiang Cheng looked angry (which was his go-to emotion for pretty much everything), but he also looked hurt. After all the years of competing and all the pressure Madam Yu had put on Jiang Cheng to get out of Wei Wuxian's shadow, he couldn't understand why Jiang Cheng would *want* to be here.

Jiang Cheng had not been there when Wei Wuxian had been whipped and disowned. Madam Yu had made it clear that it was by his own choice. Had she lied? Word had spread through the sects quickly that the First Disciple of YunmengJiang had been expelled from his clan, so she hadn't lied about all of it. That order could only have come from Jiang Fengmian. Wei Wuxian might have been traveling around from place to place, but he hadn't been in hiding. If Jiang Cheng had wanted to find him, he could have. But he hadn't.

Wei Wuxian realized he actually had no idea what either Jiang Cheng nor Lan Wangji was doing here, at this village at this exact time. It seemed clear that they thought Wei Wuxian was dead, so they couldn't have been looking for him, but no one had been able to find Wen Chao before. Without being able to speak with the spirits, Wei Wuxian wouldn't have found him, either.

"Why are you both here?" Wei Wuxian asked. Wen Chao was still trying to get oxygen into his body. It would be a few minutes before he would be able to answer any questions Wei Wuxian might ask him.

"We've been hunting Wen Chao ever since he ran away like a coward from Cloud Recesses," Jiang Cheng said scornfully. "But he's been in hiding. We'd paid innkeepers along the way to let us know if they saw him, or any of his men." Jiang Cheng stopped, looking over to Lan Wangji.

"I know for a fact that Wen Chao has been here for weeks," Wei Wuxian said. "What, you just got lucky?"

"An innkeeper recognized you," Lan Wangji said, his hand clenching over the hilt of *Bichen* . "He notified me. We were… uncertain as to the truth of his claim."

Lan Wangji's face was still perfectly frozen, but his eyes were blazing with an intensity that made Wei Wuxian's throat feel tight.

"Wen Chao told us you were dead," Jiang Cheng said, his voice rough. "He sent Hanguang Jun your fuckng *sword* , and told him that-," Jiang Cheng's voice broke, and he glared angrily at Lan Wangji.

"Wen Chao said that he had killed you himself, and that if I had been considering you as a cultivation partner, he was clearly the better choice as he had proven the stronger of the two," Lan Wangji said, his voice smooth as a frozen pond, but somehow managed to reverberate with absolute fury.

Which made sense because who the fuck did Wen Chao think he was to presume to be anywhere *near* Lan Wangji's level?! No wonder Lan Wangji was pissed. It was a serious insult. Wei Wuxian was also annoyed at Wen Chao's claim that he had actually been able to best him in a fight.

"Yeah, he fought me himself if by 'himself' he means hiding behind forty other cultivators and attacking me when I was fucking drained from fighting the *Xiangliu* ," Wei Wuxian scoffed.

"And then he threw you into the Burial Mounds," Lan Wangji said in the same frozen blade of a voice as before.

Wei Wuxian shrugged.

“Like you said. Wen Chao is a coward. He was afraid I’d come back for him even if he killed me.” Wei Wuxian turned and looked at Wen Chao’s cowering form. “He was right.”

Wen Chao whimpered.

“So the innkeeper sent you a message and you followed me here?”

“We were too far behind to follow you. But people had seen the direction you were going in. We were looking in the area when two Wen cultivators came running down the road babbling about some Yiling Burial Mounds *Laozu* who had killed Wen Chao’s entire secret garrison but had spared them so magnanimously,” Jiang Cheng said, rolling his eyes.

Wei Wuxian laughed. “Ah, those kids. And so you just figured that it was me?”

“We weren’t sure, but the boys confirmed that Wen Chao was here,” Jiang Cheng replied.

Wei Wuxian nodded. He steeled himself as he turned to face Lan Wangji. “Right. Then let’s deal with what we’re all here for. Lan Zhan. We will need to know if he’s telling the truth or making up lies. Why don’t you go and search the room he was using as his office and see if Wen Ruohan was stupid enough to put any of his plans in writing. At the very least, there should be maps marking where the Wen forces are located.”

Lan Wangji made no move to leave, his eyes locked on Wei Wuxian.

“Please. Lan Zhan.” Wei Wuxian couldn’t put into words how much he absolutely could not handle Lan Wangji looking at him now. Could not handle Lan Wangji watching him slowly take Wen Chao apart. Wei Wuxian could not stop what he was about to do. *Would* not. He had made a promise to the spirits in the Burial Mounds. He had made a promise to himself.

Wen Chao deserved it, but Wei Wuxian did not want to taint Lan Wangji with what was to come.

After a few suspended moments, Lan Wangji dipped his head slightly, then turned and walked from the room.

Wei Wuxian didn’t know why it made his eyes burn.

He turned back to Wen Chao, feeling the shape of the dark smile that was twisting his lips.

“Now. You’re going to tell us everything you know about your father’s plans for the war.”

Jiang Cheng stepped up to stand beside Wei Wuxian’s shoulder, *Zidian* sparking as they began their interrogation.

To be continued...

I am thinking of writing a few time stamps with lwj's pov, and maybe one from JC's. Is there interest in me posting them? I would need to wait a little bit so that I don't spoil things that wwx is going to find out over the next couple of chapters but I have been spending a lot of time

thinking about what lwj's thoughts were when he got the weakened butterfly message, when he got wwx's sword, and when he first saw wwx post burial mounds. idk.

Feel free to come say hi or DM me on Twitter @Kizukatana

ALSO!! I am dying to find a wangxian video to Blue Jeans by Lana Del Ray. If you guys have seen one can you link me???? I tried to make one for myself but like... I suck at video editing because I have crappy tools and it ISN'T WORKING *cries*

Chapter 12: Hold my sword

A/N - Sorry this update is late. I had been really convinced that all the crazy election shit would be settled by now, and when they moved the finish line on me I didn't have the mental/emotional stamina to take it so I face planted for several days. But… I'm… getting better now? Idek. Honestly, I wish someone could just knock me out and wake me up on Jan 20 to see what happened.

Wei Wuxian looked from the unconscious form of Wen Chao to Jiang Cheng's hardened expression. He felt a flicker of relief that the earlier signs of fear on his former brother's face had gone. Jiang Cheng might not approve of Wei Wuxian's new abilities, but he wasn't condemning him for them, either.

"Do you believe what he said about Lotus Pier being the next target?" Jiang Cheng asked him.

Wei Wuxian rubbed the bridge of his nose, considering, as he looked down at the bleeding body of the man who had given them the information. It was true that people would say anything to get out of being tortured, but Wen Chao knew that Wei Wuxian could do much worse than he had. And Lan Wangji would likely be able to verify pieces of what the man said.

"Cloud Recesses is weakened and focused on rebuilding. It makes sense that the Wen want to attack Lotus Pier when they won't have allies able to come and help them. If they strike Cloud Recesses again, it doesn't buy them anything. Both Lotus Pier and possibly even the Unclean Realms would come to their aid."

Jiang Cheng gave a sharp nod. "Let's see what Lan Wangji found in Wen Chao's war office."

"Lotus Pier is next," Lan Wangji stated, stepping gracefully into the room. His eyes rapidly took in Wen Chao's still breathing form before narrowing in concern at Wei Wuxian. "You look unwell."

Wei Wuxian gave a sardonic smirk, ignoring the slight lightheadedness that he had been feeling for the past thirty minutes or so. "Being dead for three months will do that. What else did you find? Any more mythical creatures up Wen Ruohan's sleeve?"

Lan Wangji eyed Wei Wuxian for a moment at the flip response, but then gave a slight shake of his head. "Only *Xiangliu* . Sect Leader Ruohan was displeased at the plan's failure."

Jiang Cheng snorted. "I bet. Now he has to actually fight us."

Lan Wangji shifted his attention to Jiang Cheng. "Unfortunately, Wen Ruohan has compensated by recruiting significantly more mercenary forces than we had expected."

Jiang Cheng grimaced, then turned towards Wen Chao. "It looks like he told us everything, then." He turned to Wei Wuxian. "Of the three of us, you have the most reason to kill him after what he did to you. Hanguang-Jun. I know you haven't been willing to let my brother's sword off your hip, but maybe it's time to return it to its rightful owner."

Wei Wuxian's gaze snapped to the familiar dark sword that still hung at Hanguang-Jun's side. It struck him that he'd fought an entire regiment and hadn't missed his blade even once.

Lan Wangji shot Jiang Cheng a freezing glare, but the tips of his ears had gone pink. It must have been a hassle for Lan Wangji to carry it around all this time. Wei Wuxian wondered if he had been carrying it out of guilt. He really hoped not. It was definitely not Lan Wangji's fault that Wen Chao was a giant coward and threw Wei Wuxian in the Burial Mounds.

"Of course," Lan Wangji said, detaching *Suibian* from his side and handing it to Wei Wuxian.

The instant Wei Wuxian's hand closed around *Suibian* , a blinding spike of pain lanced from his Golden Core through his arm and into the hand that held the blade. His vision darkened and the floor tilted beneath his feet.

"F-fuck!" Wei Wuxian gritted out as his body seized in pain and *Suibian* slipped from his grip, clattering to the floor.

"Wei Ying!"

"Wei Wuxian!"

He felt a large hand close around his upper arm, supporting him, and another at his back. He took a moment to just steady his breathing before he could open his eyes.

Lan Wangji had slid an arm around his waist, while Jiang Cheng had crouched down and was looking at Wei Wuxian's hand, where dark, Yin energy was coming out of it like steam.

"What was that?" Wei Wuxian asked no one in particular, flexing his fingers as he tried to make sense of what had just happened. He was relieved that the muscles responded normally, and the flesh appeared undamaged, despite it feeling like it had just been doused with alcohol and lit on fire.

Lan Wangji looked intently as the final wisps of resentful energy drifted away from Wei Wuxian's palm. The heat from Lan Wangji's hands felt soothing, though Wei Wuxian couldn't really understand why. It wasn't like Lan Wangji was putting any spiritual energy into him or anything. But it felt oddly… comforting. At the thought, Wei Wuxian felt a surge of shame. Lan Wangji was so pure, he should not have to touch someone as corrupted as Wei Wuxian. It was no wonder he wasn't trying to put any of his spiritual energy into healing Wei Wuxian. What if the resentful energy inside him corrupted Lan Wangji?

Wei Wuxian was grateful that at least Lan Wangji's face didn't even hold a flicker of revulsion, despite how much he knew the man detested the very idea of any cultivator harnessing resentful energy. It was humbling, how *good* Lan Wangji was that he wanted to help someone even if he disapproved of them.

"You idiot! What did you do to yourself this time?!" Jiang Cheng was shouting, glaring up at Wei Wuxian. His words and tone were angry, but Wei Wuxian had no trouble reading the panic in his brother's gaze.

"Jiang Wanyin." Lan Wangji definitely wasn't getting the same vibe from the Jiang Sect Heir, which he made clear by subtly pulling Wei Wuxian tighter to his side and slicing a look Jiang

Cheng's way that would have felled a cultivator who hadn't already grown up under the near constant rage and scathing eye of Madam Yu. Jiang Cheng ignored him.

"Suibian is your own fucking sword. It shouldn't react against you like that!" Jiang Cheng continued angrily, though it wasn't clear if his anger was directed at Wei Wuxian, *Suibian* , Lan Wangji, or the universe in general. Likely a combination of all four, as well as anything else that happened to be in the man's field of vision at the moment. Wei Wuxian knew the flavors of Jiang Cheng's anger as well as he knew the flavors of his sister's cooking, and this particular flavor was 'worry'.

"I'm ok, Jiang Cheng." Wei Wuxian broke away from Lan Wangji's hold, though the man's grip tightened fractionally for a moment before he released Wei Wuxian. The tiny, perfect furrow between Lan Wangji's brows to deepen ever so slightly, likely in annoyance at Jiang Cheng's continued glower.

"Shut up! You're not fucking fine. You look like death and can't even hold your own sword!"

"I'll figure it out *,* " Wei Wuxian said, looking down at his sword. He didn't know exactly what had happened, but the sword hadn't rejected him. It had connected to Wei Wuxian's spiritual energy pathways as usual, only… they had already been filled with Yin energy. Spiritual swords could only channel Yang energy. "But right now, we need to finish things here."

"Wei Ying should rest," Lan Wangji said seriously. "I will take care of Wen Chao."

If Wei Wuxian didn't know better, he would almost have though there was an edge of anticipation in Lan Wangji's voice. But, of course, someone as honorable as Hanguang-Jun would not be *looking forward* to physical revenge on someone, even if that person had attacked his home. But even if Lan Wangji *had* wanted to be the one to end Wen Chao and avenge his sect, the honor belonged to someone else.

"No. There are others who are ahead of us in line in the need to kill this Wen dog. I gave my word to them." Wei Wuxian pulled out *Chenqing* , pretending he didn't detect the questioning look from Lan Wangji or the derisive snort from Jiang Cheng. There was no negative reaction when his fingers slid along it's smooth contours, and Wei Wuxian wasn't sure how he felt about the fact that he could not currently wield *Suibian* , but he could play *Chenqing.*

"What the fuck?" Jiang Cheng began, but Wei Wuxian ignored him and started to play. All the resentful energy that had been drawn to the village by Wei Wuxian's modified talismans began to slowly converge into the room, focused on Wen Chao. Wei Wuxian called to the spirits that were still lingering in the courtyard, all of the negative energy that his talismans had drawn in to the village. Tendrils of dark energy curled over the edges of Wei Wuxian's robes, snaked through his fingers, and began to coil inexorably around Wen Chao.

Wei Wuxian poured empathy into the notes he played, blending them with a direction for them to act.

It's over.

Show him what he did.

Make him feel what you felt.

Then rest.

Move on.

Let it be over for you.

End it.

It was easier to let the residual consciousness of the Burial Mounds do what it wanted, but much harder to give it very specific instructions. Wei Wuxian concentrated, trying to connect with the anguish and anger that the spirits had left behind, and then directing it to its source. He didn't want to leave a center of resentful energy in the village that could be triggered by anything that came along later, and he definitely didn't want anything to mistake Jiang Cheng or Lan Wangji as targets. He needed to let it find closure, then he needed to calm it so it could move on. He had only been able to hold a small portion of the spiritual energy from the Burial Mounds in him, but he hoped at least the portion he'd carried with him would find peace.

The music started out as lashing, harsh, recalling the resentfulness and horror of what had happened. Wen Chao screamed and clawed at his face as the images of the dead overwhelmed his mind with scenes from the pain that Wen Chao had inflicted on so many. He would not just see their pain, but he would feel it, taste it, and smell it. It would become Wen Chao's pain.

The dark mist enshrouded Wen Chao, pressing in on both his body and mind. It was but a tiny fraction of what Wei Wuxian had felt when he'd been thrown in the Burial Mounds, but Wen Chao buckled under its intensity.

He could feel the moment that the spirits had fully consumed the man's mind. Wen Chao had died a pathetic coward, huddled in a corner filled with terror. He had been killed by trauma of his own making.

It was a fitting end.

Rest.

He can't do it again.

The melody Wei Wuxian shifted to something much more soothing as he repeated thoughts of rest and reassurance like a mantra. The notes wandered a bit as he tried to settle into a clear melody to convey those messages, but he didn't know very many songs. The Jiang's were not known for musical cultivation like some other clans were, and after he left Lotus Pier, he didn't exactly have time to take up music lessons.

Slowly, a tune emerged. Wei Wuxian wasn't exactly sure where he'd heard it, but he felt the notes flowing through him, somehow tied to a memory of comfort and peace. Beside him, he heard Lan Wangji draw in a sharp breath, but he couldn't turn to look at him lest he lose focus. The ghoul child and the courtesan drifted back to Wei Wuxian.

He could not stop in his playing, but he closed his eyes and visualized stroking the small child's hair in both comfort and farewell, then the same to the courtesan. He could feel the moment when they left, and he hoped they would be able to successfully enter the reincarnation cycle and have a better life in their next incarnation. He wasn't sure how long he had played, but the room

had become still, devoid of any resentful spirits. His body still carried some residual resentful energy, but he was no longer overflowing with it like he had been since the Burial Mounds.

Wei Wuxian breathed out one final note, then lowered the flute from his lips. Lan Wangji's eyes were locked on Wei Wuxian with a strange intensity, but Wei Wuxian was not able to identify what the look was about.

His hands began to shake. The resentful energy that he had been channeling was now mostly dispersed, and his body was suddenly making him aware of the fact that he had eaten nothing in the past 24 hours. Not to mention the three months prior. Inedia was something Wei Wuxian had experience with, but never for the amount of time that his descent into the Burial Mounds had forced upon him. The energy that he had been overflowing with had shielded him from feeling the lack of food, but now that he had released so much of it, his system no longer had anything to sustain itself.

"Wei Ying. Sit." Lan Wangji was already guiding Wei Wuxian to a chair. Jiang Cheng had picked up *Suibian,* and was staring at Wei Wuxian in a mix of concern and shock. It was odd to see his former brother so overwhelmed that he couldn't throw up a front of anger to cover his reaction.

"What was that?" Jiang Cheng snapped, visibly trying to pull himself together. "You just… how did you…"

Wei Wuxian worked up a smirk, but he knew it was a pretty pathetic one. He wished he could claim he'd learned this from a forgotten text he'd found in a cave somewhere, but Jiang Cheng already knew about the Burial Mounds. He didn't want his brother or Lan Wangji thinking too much about what that had been like. He hoped they never had to know what it had been like. It was bad enough that Wei Wuxian would carry those images with him for the rest of his life. No one else should have to deal with it.

"Does it matter? Wen Chao is dead." Wei Wuxian leaned back in the chair, closing his eyes briefly. He had known his actions would be… disturbing to other cultivators. But he really wasn't up for debating or explaining anything right then.

"This will damage you. If you continue on this path. There is a reason that others do not try it," Lan Wangji said. Wei Wuxian opened his eyes to find Lan Wangji's locked on his.

Wei Wuxian felt himself bristle at the judgement he heard in Lan Wangji's words. "Do you think you know my body better than I do? Do you think that I would be unaware of any consequences of my actions to my own self?" Wei Wuxian asked sharply.

Lan Wangji's lips tightened. "It is not only Wei Wuxian's body that will be effected. There are reasons why it is forbidden."

Of course. The rules. Lan Wangji had often been the one to report Wei Wuxian for breaking the rules during his first stay at Cloud Recesses. But they weren't at Cloud Recesses now, and Lan Wangji had no right to call him out for something that he had no control over.

"It's my mind. It's my heart. It's of no concern to anyone else," Wei Wuxian replied, his tone sharp as he met Lan Wangji's focused gaze head on. "I don't belong to the GusuLan sect."

Lan Wangji's gaze shuttered, but not before there was a flicker of… something. Wei Wuxian was too exhausted to try to figure it out.

"Wei Wuxian just took out an entire garrison of Wen soldiers. Being critical of his methods isn't necessary," Jiang Cheng said, giving Lan Wangji a hard stare.

"And the cost to Wei Ying?" Lan Wangji's voice was hard as ice as he glared Jiang Cheng down. "There has never been an instance where resentful energy has been channeled without harming the cultivator. Not one."

"It's my problem, not anyone else's. I don't belong to any sect, which means I follow my own rules and bear my own consequences," Wei Wuxian cut off the brewing argument. The glaring contest between the two other cultivators in the room didn't seem to be letting up. It had only grown to now include glaring at Wei Wuxian, so he decided to change the subject. "Look. I need to eat something, then let's figure out what we know about Wen Ruohan's plans and how we can fuck them up. That's what you were both here for in the first place, right?"

"Wei Ying has lost weight," Lan Wangji said, his glare dissipating into a tiny frown.

"Yeah, well," Wei Wuxian shrugged, not really wanting to talk about it. "Didn't have a lot of time for eating recently. There must be some food around, with so many troops stationed here."

Jiang Cheng frowned. "We already got what we came for, here. We should leave before reinforcements come. We need to get the information back to Lotus Pier."

Wei Wuxian leaned back in his chair, spreading his legs wide. "Let them send reinforcements. It will save us the trouble of hunting them down."

Lan Wangji's eyes darkened, and his hand wrapped around *Bichen* 's hilt as he looked at Wei Wuxian, his gaze flickering briefly along the lines of Wei Wuxian's boldly sprawled body.

Evidently even the Second Jade could be susceptible to blood lust, if his home has been attacked , Wei Wuxian thought.

"I will find Wei Ying food," Lan Wangji said tightly. He must have been feeling uncomfortable by the brief flicker of his own emotion, because his posture seemed even more rigid than usual, his tightly leashed control palpable in the room. "But we should leave as soon as possible. Both sects need the information we have found here." He paused to look at Jiang Cheng, whose eyes had widened in surprise at Hanguang-Jun's offer to perform such a menial task. "You will find me immediately if his condition changes."

Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes, but nodded in agreement. Lan Wangji gave a nearly undetectable nod in acknowledgement, then turned and walked out of the room, his posture perfectly erect with one hand in an elegant fist behind his back.

Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian both watched Lan Wangji leave to find food. Then Jiang Cheng turned his attention back to Wei Wuxian. He held *Suibian* loosely in his hands, studying it.

"Can you… not hold it anymore, because of whatever happened to you?" Jiang Cheng asked, his voice low. For someone who had spent his life defining himself by his prowess with a sword the

way Jiang Cheng, the thought was likely unbearable to him.

Wei Wuxian looked down at his hand, trying to remember the details of exactly what had happened when he had tried to hold his sword.

“I think… it was just because my pathways and meridians were so full of Yin energy.”

Jiang Cheng flinched at his words, but Wei Wuxian didn’t soften them. If the man was going to ask a question, then he better be prepared for the answer he received.

“If I can purge the resentful energy from my system, I should still be able to wield it. I haven’t really had any time to test things out but, I think my core is ok. It seemed like the two types of energy sort of… reacted with each other.”

Jiang Cheng nodded slowly, then he leaned forward and slid *Suibian* into the tie at Wei Wuxian’s waist. “Then you should keep it with you. I’m tired of seeing it up against GusuLan robes,” Jiang Cheng said, dryly.

Wei Wuxian laughed at the unexpected comment. “Yeah, what was up with that? I mean, it seemed like you both thought I was dead, right? Why would Lan Zhan lug some random sword around with him if he didn’t think he’d see me again to give it back”?

Jiang Cheng looked at him with an expression that clearly said ‘*are you fucking stupid*’.

“What? It’s a fair question. Extra weight in a battle is a disadvantage,” Wei Wuxian said, defensively.

Jiang Cheng scrubbed a hand down the front of his face. “Right. Random sword. Ok. Look, we didn’t know for sure you were dead. Lan Wangji tried playing Inquiry, but you never responded so he thought there was a chance, I guess.”

Wei Wuxian frowned. “That’s stupid. If I ended up being alive, then he could just have me come pick up my sword. He didn’t need to carry it around like that. It must have been annoying.”

Jiang Cheng stared at him for a moment, then stood. “As much as it pains me to say it, Lan Wangji isn’t the stupid one in this scenario. I’m not fucking dealing with this. I’m going to go see if Lan Wangji needs any help finding food.”

Wei Wuxian blinked in surprise as his brother stalked angrily out of the room.

What was Jiang Cheng’s problem? Wei Wuxian wondered. It was clear that his former sect brother had not gained any skills regarding patience or anger management since Wei Wuxian had last seen him.

Wei Wuxian looked around the room, with all its death and gore on full display. He supposed it wouldn't be a terrible idea to just get enough food in him so he wasn't dizzy anymore and then relocate to an inn in another town to finish making their plans. As much as he'd grown accustomed to keeping company with the dead, Jiang Cheng and Lan Wangji had not. Maybe if they moved to another location, Jiang Cheng would unclench a tiny bit. Anything would be an improvement, if the man was going to lash out over such a simple question. Wei Wuxian sighed, then stood up to find the others so they could leave quickly.

Their work here was done, but there was still a war to be fought.

To be continued...

A/N - So… who besides wwx actually believes that what lwj was thinking when he looked at wwx was blood lust for battling the Wen?

Chapter 13: Diverging paths

Wei Wuxian found Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng in the kitchen of the building where Wen Chao had been staying. Jiang Cheng was scowling at the pot on the stove where Lan Wangji was stirring what appeared to be extremely bland congee.

Both men turned at Wei Wuxian's entrance with nearly identical looks of disapproval of Wei Wuxian leaving the place where he was supposed to have been resting (Jiang Cheng's manifesting in a fierce scowl, and Lan Wangji's appearing in the form of a very slight shift in the shape of his eyes, but the *projected meaning* was absolutely identical).

"Hey! It's not like I'm just going to sit alone with a bunch of dead people. Had enough of that, recently." The flinch that his words elicited told Wei Wuxian that it was probably a little too early for jokes like that.

"He's making it too bland. I told him you didn't grow up eating baby food," Jiang Cheng said after an awkward pause.

Lan Wangji's eyes narrowed fractionally as he shifted his gaze to Jiang Cheng. "Recovering from inedia must start with simple foods."

From the clipped tone of Lan Wangji's voice, it was not the first time he had made this point to Jiang Cheng. Jiang Cheng opened his mouth to respond, but Wei Wuxian beat him to it.

"Anything you cook would be amazing, Lan Zhan. I had just been hoping to find some leftover rice or something. You didn't have to go to the trouble."

The tips of Lan Wangji's ears pinkened as he resumed stirring the congee. "No trouble to cook for Wei Ying."

Wei Ying breathed out a laugh. "Yeah, I'm sure you both want to get out of here as soon as possible, and I'm holding us back. I'm a quick eater, I promise."

Wei Wuxian looked down at where *Suibian* was tied at his waist and missed the exasperated eye roll from Jiang Cheng and the minute tightening of Lan Wangji's lips.

"I just… I need to be able to use *Suibian* if I'm not going to slow you down even more. Traveling by foot will take too long. We need to sort through the documents Lan Zhan found and get news to the sects who are being targeted. I need to figure out…," Wei Wuxian flexed his hand wondering if he just held on to *Suibian* a little longer if his golden core would purge the resentful energy from his system, at least enough to be able to ride his sword. It would hurt like fuck, but -

" *Do not.* "

Wei Wuxian looked up to see Lan Wangji standing right in front of him, the small, perfect furrow between his brows more pronounced than Wei Wuxian could ever recall seeing. Lan Wangji was practically pitching a hissy fit.

“Are you trying to do something stupid *again?* ” Jiang Cheng rounded on Wei Wuxian. “You’ve only been not dead for a fucking *day.* You get yourself killed again and I will break both your legs!”

“I didn’t do anything!” Wei Wuxian defended himself. “I just… when I gripped *Suibian* before, some of the Yin energy was cleansed out of my arm, but I dropped the sword before it got very far.”

“Don’t be a fucking idiot! You could burn out your golden core experimenting with shit like this when you *don’t know what you’re doing* . We don’t have time for you to cripple yourself with your stupid, half-baked experiments. Just shut the fuck up, eat your baby-food congee. I can carry you on *Sandu* until we find someone who actually knows something about this and can help.”

“I will carry Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji said flatly.

“We can take turns. It could be a while,” Jiang Cheng replied.

Lan Wangji’s posture grew more rigid, his hand gripping the hilt of *Bichen* . Wei Wuxian had no idea what silent communication was passing between the two, but Jiang Cheng eventually rolled his eyes and heaved a sigh full of annoyance.

“Whatever. You can carry him, then, *Hanguang-Jun.* . Saves me the trouble of lugging his useless ass around.”

Wei Wuxian was definitely going to make Jiang Cheng tell him when he and Lan Wangji got close enough to be able to read each other’s fucking *gazes* .

“Fuck off, Jiang Cheng. Which one of us just took out Wen Chao and an entire regiment? Pretty sure it wasn’t your late ass. You only showed up after it was basically finished.”

“Shut up and eat your baby food,” Jiang Cheng responded. “I’m going to go gather up all the papers. Unless you are going to insist you do *that* all on your own as well, *Hanguang-Jun?* ”

Lan Wangji ignored the bite in Jiang Cheng’s tone.

“You may go,” Lan Wangji replied primly.

Wei Wuxian thought Jiang Cheng might actually draw *Sandu* , but in the end he simply stormed out the door in a cloud of curses directed equally between Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian.

After Wei Wuxian had eaten the incredibly bland (but actually quite restoring) congee that Lan Wangji had prepared, they finished gathering up any papers that could contain intelligence on what Wen Ruohan was planning next.

“We should bury the dead,” Lan Wangji said as they stood in the courtyard, bodies strewn all around them.

“No,” Wei Wuxian responded harshly.

Lan Wangji looked over at him, his eyes reflecting disapproval. Wei Wuxian had expected this, but he still had to brace himself for the conversation he knew had to happen. Lan Wangji was not going to be happy, but he was not willing to negotiate on this point.

"Wen Ruohan and his men need to see the consequences that come from their actions. If we leave the village as it is now, they will know that no army caused this." Wei Wuxian wasn't completely sure if the words he spoke were his own, or echoes of the will of the Burial Mounds. It didn't matter, though, as he knew them to be true. "If we bury the dead, there will be no evidence of the nature of the attack, and they will likely assume that whatever army invaded simply took care of their own dead as well. We'd be drawing a target on the other sects' backs. Wen Ruohan may act in anger and launch the attack earlier on Lotus Pier, or go after Cloud Recesses again if he thinks the attack came from the Lans."

Lan Wangji paused, clearly considering Wei Wuxian's words. It was more than Wei Wuxian had expected.

"If we leave the dead unburied, some of them could turn into fierce corpses or restless spirits," Lan Wangji said gravely. "The civilians in the area could suffer."

Wei Wuxian released a bitter laugh. "The civilians in the area? They're all dead. Who do you think helped me do this? Wen Chao didn't even trust them to work as slaves. He was afraid they would poison the food or betray his location. He had his men kill civilians like the cowardly shit that he was."

Jiang Cheng's expression hardened as they looked upon the dead in a new light.

Lan Wangji looked sharply at Wei Wuxian. "They helped you? You could control them individually?"

"Lan Zhan, why so curious? Don't you know it's against your precious Lan rules to show interest in the mechanics of cultivating resentful energy. You don't want Lan Qiren to come and kick you out of Cloud Recesses." Wei Wuxian felt his lips curve into a smile, and knew it was likely not a nice one. Lan Wangji met his gaze unflinchingly. Jiang Cheng intervened, very familiar with cutting into heavy tension.

"I agree with Wei Wuxian. We send the message, and let the other sects know what we found about the battle plans," Jiang Cheng growled out.

Lan Wangji's lips tightened. Wei Wuxian knew that Lan Wangji felt very strongly both about demonic cultivation as well as giving the dead their proper rites, no matter who those dead were. It would be hard for the man to go along with what Wei Wuxian had suggested, and even harder for him to let the matter of cultivation resentful energy lie. He had expected no less from the honorable Hanguang-Jun. It wasn't even that Wei Wuxian disagreed with him. In an ideal world, the dead would be honored and laid to rest properly. But in an ideal world, soldiers wouldn't slaughter civilians for convenience and cowardice, and there would be no resentful energy to cultivate.

They lived in a world where respect and honor were not often rewarded, much less reciprocated. The rules that the Lan clung so rigidly to belonged in a world that didn't exist anymore, if it ever had.

Rules weren't more important than people. At least, they shouldn't be.

"Lan Zhan. If we take the time to bury the dead here, we put Lotus Pier at risk. I can't undo the killing of the villagers that had happened here before I arrived, but I can and will send a warning that future killings will not go unpunished. If this makes them hesitate at even one village, it's worth it. "

Lan Wangji looked at him for a moment, then turned to look out over the dead surrounding them. Wei Wuxian could tell that he still didn't fully agree, but Lan Wangji didn't have a better alternative, either.

"When we have warned the sects, if the Wen's haven't dealt with their own dead, we'll lay them to rest properly," Lan Wangji stated firmly.

Wei Wuxian hummed in general agreement. If they all lived that long, it was a task he would happily complete. But there was more urgent work at hand. The sun was rising, and the light caught on a talisman, moving gently in the breeze. It was one of the many Wei Wuxian had rewritten. He walked over to it, then traced out the pattern of a simple burning talisman. Instead of trying to access his golden core, he powered it with the residual resentful energy that was still in his system. The talisman curled into ash before dropping to the ground. Wei Wuxian hummed. He might not be able to use *Suibian* with Yin energy, but he could use all his knowledge of talismans that he'd practiced with Yang energy and still apply them.

That was good to know. He was going to need to figure out how much of his cultivation techniques were usable with the two different types of energy, given that switching between them was - at least for the moment - slow and excruciatingly painful.

"We need to burn them all. I don't want the Wen using this talisman against the other sects. Wen Ruohan already used resentful energy to control the *Xiangliu* ."

The implication that the other sects had carried out misdeeds to the extent that such a talisman might be effective hung heavily in the air between the three men, but no one contradicted Wei Wuxian. Between the three of them, they were able to quickly burn the talismans. Lan Wangji studied the first talisman that he came to before destroying it. Wei Wuxian didn't need to see the man's face to know disapproval would be written all over it, but at least Lan Wangji kept silent about his disapproval.

Wei Wuxian respected Lan Wangji's discipline and clarity, but he did not have the luxury of picking and choosing which battles were his to fight. Wei Wuxian had no clan, no family, no formal alliance of any kind who could step in and help if he failed. If he was going to help protect the people he cared about, he would take any tool available to him to do so.

For Lan Wangji and his clan, honor was defined by the path taken, not the destination reached. Wei Wuxian had seen too much for him to believe the same. In his mind, there was no honor in letting innocents die, even if one obeyed every honorable rule along that path. This point of view was something he knew, fundamentally, would always separate Lan Wangji from himself. Jiang Cheng was more willing to bend the rules when push came to shove, but he was still the sect heir and had more restrictions on how far he could go because it would reflect on his entire sect.

Wei Wuxian therefore knew that he was likely to find himself on his own in the very near future, if he kept on the path that he had started down. He enjoyed the company while he had it, but he knew from past experiences he could not rely on it for the long term. He was useful, for the moment. But in the end, the sects had strict rules and punishments for people like him, and the two men currently working beside him belonged to sects that were extremely fond of punishments.

He breathed out a short huff of air. Such thoughts were irrelevant. They had papers to read, and sects to warn. They would each do what they needed to do, in the end.

The journey away from the village passed in a haze of nausea for Wei Wuxian. He could feel Lan Wangji standing stiffly behind him as they rode *Bichen* , disapproval radiating from his frame. Wei Wuxian wasn't sure if that was why the congee that Lan Wangji had made for him was sitting like lead in his stomach, but he was too busy focusing on keeping the nausea at bay to really evaluate its source. The last thing he wanted to do was throw up all over Lan Wangji's glowing white robes. He was well aware that he was dirtying the man enough simply by sharing his sword with him.

Wei Wuxian jumped to the ground before *Bichen* had even stopped moving. He could feel Lan Wangji's gaze on him as he walked over to Jiang Cheng. His brother didn't look any happier with him than Lan Wangji did, but Wei Wuxian was used to Jiang Cheng's disapproval. It took him a moment to realize that they were at the same inn he had spent the night in just before finding Wen Chao.

"What's wrong with you? You look like shit. Stand up like a regular person instead of swaying all over the fucking place! We're trying to not draw attention!" Jiang Cheng glared at him, but there was a shadow of concern behind his eyes.

Wei Wuxian grinned. "Even half dead I still look better than you. Besides, if I throw up or pass out people will just assume that I'm drunk."

"Wei Ying feels nauseous?" Lan Wangji asked, stepping forward. This seemed a somewhat foolish act if Wei Wuxian was actually going to throw up.

"Whatever. Let's just get some rooms. We need to go through those papers and get the information to Lotus Piers as soon as possible. I stayed here the other night. The rooms are small but the food was decent," Wei Wuxian dodged the concern of both his companions, and turned and walked into the inn.

It was clear that the innkeeper was known to both Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng (which likely explained why they were here, given the sensitive nature of the information they were carrying). Their rooms were quickly decided and Wei Wuxian somehow ended up having a room with two beds all to himself, with Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng having singles.

"Why does the Nobody in this group get the fancy room and the two sect heirs get the smaller ones?" Wei Wuxian asked.

Lan Wangji didn't look happy with the question, but Jiang Cheng responded. "You look like you're going to fall over. The double room has more space, and a larger table. We'll take our

meal in that room, and you can lay down so we don't have to carry you to your own room later if you have more than a sip of wine with dinner."

"Oi, fuck you, A-Cheng! I'm fine walking on my own. You're the one who always needs to be carried to his bed when we go out drinking."

"No one is drinking. Jiang Wanyin will read the documents to us while I play Cleansing for Wei Ying."

"Ah, Lan Zhan. You don't need to -"

"Shut the fuck up and let him play, you idiot!" Jiang Cheng shouted. "You can't even hold your fucking *sword* ."

Wei Wuxian for once didn't try to laugh it off. "You think I don't know that?" He asked, quietly. "But you know as well as I do that one cultivator doesn't matter in a war. As soon as Wen Chao's body is discovered, the Wen will know we have their battle plans. This information is only valuable until they find out about it. They'll change locations and tactics as soon as they find out we've seen these. We *all* need to be reading these documents as fast as we fucking *can* ."

Jiang Cheng scowled, but couldn't refute it.

"We will be able to get the information to everyone faster if Wei Ying is recovered. I will play. You can read."

Wei Wuxian was unhappy that his physical condition was going to slow them down, but wasting time arguing with the brick wall that was Lan Wangji also would not speed things up.

Lan Wangji began to play before Jiang Cheng had even gotten the papers they'd taken from Wen Chao's study unpacked. Wei Wuxian grabbed a set of papers, but closed his eyes momentarily, feeling the spiritual energy of the guqin's notes washing through his body. He could feel it working, slowly purifying and calming the resentful energy that was still in his body.

He tried to focus on his own reading, letting the other two know when he found something important and listening carefully when Jiang Cheng did the same, but it was a struggle.

He could feel Cleansing slowly working, but it would be too slow. He needed to find a faster way to expel more of it from his system. Maybe channeling the flow of resentful energy could be directed internally the same way the flow of his own qi could. Wei Wuxian concentrated, trying to direct as much of the resentful energy as he could into his stomach. The sound of Lan Wangji's guqin continued to wash over him, relaxing him enough that he felt like the flow was a bit easier to manage than it would be without it.

"It looks like the Wen have been dividing their troops and having them stationed in small villages. There are about twelve of them on this map, though there isn't a date on it so I don't know how accurate it is right now."

"They are trying to hide the size of their army as they move closer to Lotus Pier," Lan Wangji suggested.

Jiang Cheng frowned as he continued to read through the papers. “It looks like they have almost tripled the size of their army in just the past few months. Many of these divisions are hired swords. Where the fuck did they get the money for this?”

A thought flickered at the back of Wei Wuxian’s memory, something about Wen Chao, but he couldn’t quite bring it to the surface. His stomach had been slowly filling and tightening; thick, sticky resentment pooling in his gut. He had only a moment’s warning before he was grabbing the bowl on the basin stand and retching into it. He spat the thick, black blood, clotted with resentful energy into the bowl.

“Wei Ying!” Lan Wangji stopped playing and Jiang Cheng stopped reading, both of them moving quickly to his side.

The only other time Wei Wuxian had had something like this happen before was when he and Lan Wangji had been battling the Tortoise of Slaughter. It hadn’t been pleasant that time, either, but at least he had been able to purge a significant portion of the resentful energy from his system.

“S’fine,” Wei Wuxian muttered, moving over to the wash basin to wipe his face with the towel next to the pitcher of water that was kept there. “Is the dinner coming soon? I could use some wine to rinse the taste from my mouth.”

“You just puked out black goo and you want to fucking *drink* ?!” Jiang Cheng shouted. “You can already barely stand. Don’t be such an idiot.”

“I will check on the dinner,” Lan Wangji said calmly, hesitating for a moment to look at the tainted blood that Wei Wuxian had expelled. “Then we will continue with Cleansing.”

Jiang Cheng glared at Lan Wangji (who completely ignored him as he left the room), before transferring his glare back to Wei Wuxian.

“Why are you letting him play for you? Did you see the look on his face? He’s going to go back and report you to the Lan elders. I don’t have any way to protect you if they demand you go there for punishment!”

Wei Wuxian sighed. He was well aware of what the Lan elders would have to say about this. He had experienced first hand how completely Lan Wangji followed their rules, whether he was within the Cloud Recesses or not.

“It’s not like we have a lot of options. The Lan sect is the only one who knows how to play Cleansing, as far as I know. You and I fucking don’t, that’s for sure. Besides, why are you blaming me about Lan Zhan being here? You’re the one who brought him along. And don’t think I missed those little side-eye exchanges between the two of you. This isn’t your first time working together.”

Jiang Cheng opened his mouth, but then snapped it shut, his face twisting and flushing slightly. “He was the one who… who told me about you. When Wen Chao brought him your sword. *He* was the one you sent your *dying fucking words* to!”

Wei Wuxian flinched. Yeah, Jiang Cheng would not be happy about that. “Look, he was the one with a traitor in his clan, along with A-Yuan and the others to protect. He’d been with me with

the *Xiangliu* , so he'd understand about the poison. And Wen Qing had the antidote right there! It just… it had to be Lan Zhan. I didn't have the strength to send two messages."

Jiang Cheng turned away. "Right. Because *he's* been the one you've been hunting with. *He* was the one you turned to when you were injured. Lan *fucking* Wangji was the one you trusted to protect your friends. Who am I? I'm just your brother. Why bother with me!"

Wei Wuxian blinked, totally unprepared for the raw emotion in Jiang Cheng's voice. "Jiang Cheng-" Wei Wuxian began.

"No. Forget it. It doesn't matter. What business is it of mine what the fuck you do or who the fuck you hang out with. You made your choice."

"My… *choice?* What the fuck, Jiang Cheng! You think it was *my choice* to get expelled from Lotus Pier? My *choice* to have Madam Yu not even let me into Lotus Pier when I got back from Cloud Recesses, and instead stop me on the docks and whip me to within an inch of my life in front of half the villagers? My *choice* that she told me how I was nothing but -" Wei Wuxian cut himself off, seeing the pallor on Jiang Cheng's face.

"She *whipped* you?! What did Mother say to you?" Jiang Cheng demanded.

Wei Wuxian drew a breath. The whipping should not have been a surprise to his brother. He'd witnessed it often enough. But each time, Jiang Fengmian would calmly tell Madam Yu not to do it again. And each time, she would ignore him.

Feeding Jiang Cheng's anger and resentment towards his mother would not help his brother. Jiang Fengmian was a good man, but he would not allow Jiang Cheng to speak out against Madam Yu or show her any disrespect. And Jiang Cheng was not one known for his ability to hold his tongue. What was done was done.

"It was a long time ago, Jiang Cheng. Madam Yu made it clear I wasn't welcome back on YunmengJiang lands, and wasn't allowed to contact you or *Shijie* . But it wasn't ever my choice to leave."

Jiang Cheng looked like he might say something more, but the door opened with Lan Wangji leading in a servant from the inn bearing their dinner as well as tea and two jars of wine. Wei Wuxian watched Lan Wangji pay for their meal, and the thought that had flitted through his memory earlier resurfaced. As soon as the servant had left, Wei Wuxian put up a sound-proofing ward.

"The Jins are funding the new troops."

Both Jiang Cheng and Lan Wangji looked skeptical.

"The Jins know that the Wen tried to poison Lotus Pier. A-Jie is engaged to the Jin sect heir! He might be a peacock and an asshole, but he wouldn't want his fiancee dead!"

Wei Wuxian shook his head. "Before he threw me in the Burial Mounds, Wen Chao told me that his father was pissed about the whole *Xiangliu* thing because it was 'the key to neutralizing two of the enemy sects while he went for the third'. Lotus Pier and Cloud Recesses were the two he

was going to neutralize, which meant the Nie or the Jins were the third. Only one of those two clans has the gold to fund an army like the Wen are building.``

Wei Wuxian ignored the tensing of both men when he'd mentioned the Burial Mounds, and pushed on. "The Jins' cultivation isn't strong enough that they could win in a war fought with their own skills, but they could *fund* the swords of the Wen, and divide the spoils later. I don't know if the Peacock knows about it or not. But Jin Guangshan is not someone I would trust with the dirt from my shoe."

Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng both took a moment to digest his words.

"We need to get to Lotus Pier. We need to prepare for the attack, and Mother has connections at Koi Tower. Maybe we can get information on the Jin involvement."

"Brother has a friend in the Unclean Realms," Lan Wangji added, nodding. "We must get this information to the sects."

Jiang Cheng turned to Wei Wuxian. "Come to Lotus Pier with me. We can tell Father about the armies, and Mother will handle the Jin."

Wei Wuxian hesitated, causing Jiang Cheng to scowl furiously. "What, you don't want to help protect Lotus Pier?"

Lan Wangji stiffened beside Wei Wuxian. "Wei Ying should come with me to Cloud Recesses. There is a healer there that can help him with his condition. We can then both return to aid Lotus Pier, with additional reinforcements."

Wei Wuxian sighed. "Neither of your clans is likely to let me in, unless it's to punish me. And honestly, I don't have time to recover from whip injuries from Zidian or whatever the fuck Lan Qiren would cook up for me. I already took out one Wen outpost on my own. From what Jiang Cheng just read to us, there are at least three more nearby that I might be able to hit before they're warned. You two can both go warn the clans, and I'll start with weakening the Wen forces while they aren't expecting anything."

"No."

"No fucking way!"

Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng's words overlapped each other, one quiet and firm, the other loud and raging. Both essentially saying the same thing.

Wei Wuxian rolled his eyes. "It's the most sensible plan. Everyone gets warned as quickly as possible, and the Wen forces get hit while we have an advantage. An advantage that *won't last long* ."

"There's nothing fucking *sensible* about us leaving you alone *again* while you're basically useless in a fight *again* !"

Lan Wangji's expression didn't appear to disagree with Jiang Cheng's assessment, though he likely didn't approve of the vulgarity with which it was given.

“I’m not helpless. I can pull on all the resentful energy I need. I’m just trying to purge it out so I can use *Suibian* for now, but the Wen could send an entire regiment against me and they wouldn’t be able to capture me. I’m not helpless like I was last time. The most important thing is warning the other sects and eliminating the enemies we can before they know we are aware of them. You can’t put the safety of a single cultivator ahead of that.”

There was a moment of fraught silence, then Lan Wangji spoke. “Jiang Wanyin will warn Lotus Pier. That is the top priority. Wei Ying can accompany me to Cloud Recesses and I will notify Brother, and we can have Wen Qing assess you.”

“I’m not going inside Cloud Recesses,” Wei Wuxian repeated, quietly but firmly. “You know what Lan Qiren and the other elders will demand, Lan Zhan. I’ve gone way beyond just talking about the *idea* of cultivating resentful energy. I won’t let them punish me for it.”

Wei Wuxian didn’t need to state that he was more than powerful enough to refuse punishment and fight back, against the entire Lan clan if he had to. But neither he nor Lan Wangji would possibly want that.

“Come with me to Caiyi Town. Wen Qing can meet Wei Ying there. I will go to Brother, then return.”

Wei Wuxian hesitated. Surely Lan Qiren could find him in Caiyi Town if he wanted. It was still GusuLan territory, even if it wasn’t in Cloud Recesses proper. But for all Lan Wangji appeared to be pure and forthright, he knew exactly how to play dirty. He went in for the kill.

“A-Yuan would also be able to see Wei Ying in Caiyi Town.”

Wei Wuxian slumped in defeat. “ *Fine.* I’ll go to Caiyi Town with you. But if your elders come knocking on my door demanding I report to Cloud Recesses for punishment, I’m holding you responsible, Lan Zhan.”

“Will take responsibility for Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji said simply, as though there was anything simple at all about their situation.

Jiang Cheng looked extremely unhappy with the plan, but there was too much urgency to warn everyone about the Wen's troop information. They finished dinner quickly, making a copy of each of the critical documents so that Jiang Cheng could take them to Lotus Pier. It was decided that the originals should go to Cloud Recesses, as it wasn’t under imminent attack and the documents would be safer there.

When they had finished eating, Jiang Cheng decided he would head to Lotus Pier immediately rather than waiting for the following morning. Before he left, he turned to Wei Wuxian.

“If you disappear again, I’ll find you and break your legs,” he said gruffly. “I’ll make sure Father and Mother know the information we got here was from you.”

Wei Wuxian gave a hollow laugh. “Don’t bother. It will just piss Madam Yu off to have you say anything good about me.” And she’d likely also berate Jiang Cheng for not accomplishing it on his own.

Jiang Cheng grimaced, likely having the same thought. “Jieiie will be happy to hear you’re safe. Come see us soon. I’ll manage Mother.”

Wei Wuxian didn’t bother to voice his skepticism about the latter statement. “Tell Shijie I miss her.”

Jiang Cheng nodded bruskly, then headed out.

Wei Wuxian was left alone with Lan Wangji.

“Rest. I will play for Wei Ying.”

“Shouldn’t we head for Caiyi Town?”

“The urgency is less. Cloud Recesses is not under attack. Wei Ying needs food and sleep. We will leave in the morning after breakfast.”

Lan Wangji’s expression had frozen into one that Wei Wuxian had learned meant it was useless to argue with him. If he were honest with himself, Wei Wuxian was relieved that he did not need to travel that night. He wasn’t sure if he had been cleansed enough to be able to use his golden core, but his body was exhausted and half-starved.

He wanted to talk to Lan Wangji more about the battle plans, but he found himself drifting off to sleep instead.

To be continued…

A/N- So... I have a lot of thoughts about Madam Yu. I really dislike it when adults take their issues out on children, no matter how serious those issues are. So I have a deep, burning need for Madam Yu to realize that she fucked up and was wrong. idk. I might not be super nice to her. What are people's thoughts on Madam Yu and whether you think she loved wwx 'deep down' in canon or not? I mean, she didn't agree to cut off his hands, but like... she also didn't like people telling her what to do plus 'not cutting off hands' is a pretty low bar for love but idk. I am curious what you think.

Chapter 14: Communication is a double-edged sword

A/N - THANK GOD the general consensus from all of you was ‘fuck Madam Yu’. I was really terrified that she would get mixed reviews like Jiang Cheng, and I wasn’t sure how to handle that given my own personal experience with/views on child abusers even though I know child abuse was pretty much the norm for a really long time in most cultures. Also, it was super fun to see you guys talking to each other in the comments! In my old fandom, that almost never happened (at least, not on my fics) unless people were going after each other so this was really cool. I’m so happy to have joined a new tribe!!!! *hugs you all* Also, I am sorry I am taking so long to reply to the comments but there were a lot of thought- provoking ones and I wanted to take some time digesting them all.

Wei Wuxian wasn’t sure what time it was when he woke, but the darkness outside told him it was still hours before he needed to wake up. The moon was too high in the sky to shine directly into the small window in the room he was sleeping in, but what little there was caught on the pristine sleeping robes of Lan Wangji, who was lying on his back, hands folded over his chest and perfectly, still in the bed across the room from Wei Wuxian. Lan Wangji had been playing cleansing for him when he last remembered. He must have fallen asleep while Lan Wangji played for him. The thought made his face heat, in a combination of gratitude, embarrassment, and about six other things that Wei Wuxian couldn’t parse at the moment.

Likely Lan Wangji had played until he, himself, was also exhausted and had chosen to sleep in the double room rather than going all the way down the hall to his own room.

He felt a twinge of shame, that he had caused Lan Wangji to waste so much of his own spiritual energy to heal him. Wei Wuxian didn’t like being a burden on others. If he didn’t get his spiritual pathways cleared of the Yin energy, he would only continue to slow Lan Wangji down as they would have to ride *Bichen* in tandem again. Not to mention that he will need to be in control of his core if things don’t go as well in Cloud Recesses as Lan Wangji seems to think they will. The Second Jade of GusuLan will not always be there to carry Wei Wuxian around, especially if it is the GusuLan elders that Wei Wuxian is trying to avoid.

He drew a slow breath, flexing his fingers and concentrating on opening his mind and senses to assess his body. He focused inward, concentrating first on his golden core. It felt strong, and full. He couldn’t really tell if it had been contaminated by the presence of all the Yin energy, but he couldn’t sense anything different about it. He would have to examine it more carefully once he was able to draw on his own Yang energy, but for now it seemed to be alright.

Focusing on his meridians and qi pathways, he tried to evaluate how much Yin energy was still in his body.

Much less, but still significant , he thought grimly. It was too bad he couldn’t use Yin energy with *Suibian* , but the sword had made its opinions quite clear on that matter. He needed to be able to access his core if he was going to be able to fly.

Lan Wangji had played for hours, but there was still a lot left to go before Wei Wuxian’s pathways would be clear enough for his Yang energy to flow through them in any sort of

controllable, predictable way.

Cleansing was helping, but it was taking too long.

He thought back to the feel of when he had gripped *Suibian.* The pull of his spiritual sword on the energy in his golden core had been instantaneous. Yang energy had flooded into his meridians, slamming into the Yin energy that already filled them and reacting instantaneously. The searing pain that had ripped through his pathways as the flood of yang energy had collided with the sea of yin energy already in him had caused him to nearly pass out from the pain.

So simply opening the floodgates wasn't the way to go, either, since he wasn't likely to live through the process. But maybe there was a middle ground.

He was already laying down, so if he really fucked it up, at least he wouldn't hurt himself further if he lost consciousness. Wei Wuxian closed his eyes in concentration, visualizing his core. Meditation had never been his strength, but that didn't mean he *couldn't* . Especially when there was something so fascinating (and dangerous) to focus on.

With precision control, Wei Wuxian opened one pathway, guiding a tiny stream of Yang energy from his core. He sucked in a soft breath at the sharp, burning sensation, but he quickly separated off that part of his mind to prevent it from breaking his concentration. The Yin energy was reacting to the Yang energy, flaring sharply at first, then neutralizing both elements away to nothing.

It was the flare that hurt, as his pathways were basically double-flooded. He didn't know if he could actually burn his meridians out doing what he was doing, but he knew better than to not take the warning pain seriously. He tightened his control on his golden core even more, slowing the tiny stream of Yang energy down to a trickle. He still felt the surge when the energies first collided, but if he was careful with the flow, it wasn't painful.

He wasn't sure what would happen with the Yin energy that was infused through his mind and the rest of his body from his long exposure in the Burial Mounds, but he at least had found a way to clear his spiritual pathways to allow him to access his core. It would take hours, and needle-like precision in channeling his energy, but as a disciple of cultivation, Wei Wuxian had plenty of experience in putting in the time to build and focus his power.

By the time the sky outside had softened to a pre-dawn twilight, Wei Wuxian was sweaty, trembling, and breathing hard, but his pathways were clear. Deciding to test them out, he pushed himself shakily into a sitting position on the side of his bed. His outer robes had been neatly folded and placed on the night stand beside his bed (Wei Wuxian didn't remember undressing, but he had honestly been so exhausted that it didn't surprise him if he did it by wrote without thinking about it), with *Suibian* resting on top of them. That was slightly more odd, since he always left *Suibian* on the floor beside his bed where it was in easy reach, but he didn't have time to worry about it at the moment.

Wei Wuxian reached out, allowing his hand to close around the hilt of his sword. Relief rushed through him as he felt *Suibian* respond, connecting fully with his Golden Core. There were only the tiniest pinpricks of pain as the surge of power flooded through his system. He sensed movement from across the room, and looked up to find Lan Wangji's golden eyes locked on him, focusing on where his pale and trembling hand grasped his blade.

“Wei Ying. What did you do?”

Wei Wuxian flinched at the steel in Lan Wangji’s voice.

“Ahaha. Lan Zhan! I thought you were still sleeping. Look! Isn’t it amazing! I can hold *Suibian* again.” Wei Wuxian gave his biggest, most blinding grin. It worked on distracting almost anyone.

It did not work on Lan Wangji.

“I checked the progress of clearing your pathways last night while you were sleeping, before I went to bed. They were not clear enough for you to be able to safely wield *Suibian* .”

Wei Wuxian slowly stood, stretching his arms over his head as he tested both his balance and the motion of his limbs to see how much residual weakness he had in his body now that the flood of Yin energy was no longer sustaining him. Lan Wangji’s expression flickered, his gaze intensifying as his eyes skimmed over Wei Wuxian’s form, likely also assessing him for signs of weakness.

“Lan Zhan. You just did a much better job than you thought! I had a good night’s sleep and now I’m fine. See?” Wei Wuxian tossed *Suibian* lightly in the air, then mounted it, hovering in the room without a single waver in his control. His physical body was weak, but the energy of his core flooded through him, stabilizing him at least for the moment. “Good as new thanks to Lan Zhan!”

“Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji said sternly, clearly not buying it.

“Aren’t you happy? Now you don’t have to go lugging me around on your sword anymore. You should be relieved!”

Lan Wangji looked neither happy nor relieved. It was always hard to read the tiny expressions on the man’s face, but if Wei Wuxian had to name the slight tensing of Lan Wangji’s lips, he would have said that the man actually looked a bit put out, which made absolutely no sense to Wei Wuxian.

Lan Wangji was likely just sore because Wei Wuxian was dodging his question, and most people usually fell all over themselves to answer any little question the man deigned to ask of them. Wei Wuxian would normally fall into that category as well, but he’d learned a long time ago that Lan Wangji didn’t have the same philosophy of ‘just try shit out and see what works even if it might be sort of dangerous’ that Wei Wuxian had, and he really wasn’t in the mood for a lecture. (Lecture in Lan Wangji’s case meaning the words ‘Wei Ying’ spoken in a particularly scolding tone, but still somehow managing to encompass the meaning of an entire 30 minute lecture on appropriate risk-taking and the value of following protocol.)

Wei Wuxian was pretty sure he hadn’t damaged his spiritual pathways by rushing things, and - even if he had - it would be too late for Lan Wangji to fix it. He hopped off his sword, feeling his body start to rebel from the effort. Wei Wuxian hoped that food would give him the boost he’d need to make it all the way to Caiyi Town. Showing any weakness would only make Lan Wangji more annoyed that Wei Wuxian had been messing around without discussing it first.

“Let’s order breakfast and head out. We don’t have time to stand around arguing about how amazing the great Hanguang-Jun is.”

“Mm,” Lan Wangji replied, displeased, standing up and gracefully slipping on his outer robes. His hair was perfectly tidy despite having just awoken. After finishing dressing, Lan Wangji put his hair ornament in with crisp, deliberate movements that took less than a minute. Wei Wuxian avoided Lan Wangji’s disapproving look by focusing instead on the movement of the man’s strong, elegant fingers as he finished dressing. He could sense Lan Wangji building up to another verbal inquisition of Wei Wuxian’s nighttime activities, so he decided to prementively distract him.

“Aya, Lan Zhan! How do you stay so tidy even while sleeping! My hair is always a total disaster when I wake up. Teach me your secrets!” Wei Wuxian battled the heavy skepticism that filled the room with idle chatter as he wrestled his hair into a messy half-bun and put on his outer robes.

He could feel Lan Wangji’s eyes on him, and he made sure his movements show no sign of the fatigue he felt after forcibly purging his spiritual pathways during the night when he was supposed to be resting. Lan Wangji had many strengths, but verbal sparring was not one of them. Wei Wuxian unleashed a barrage of idle chatter to keep the questions at bay.

“I’m starving. Last time I slept here, I left before breakfast. I’m definitely not making that mistake again! I’ll go down and order us something. I’m guessing Lan Zhan prefers plain congee?”

There was a silent moment where Lan Wangji pinned Wei Wuxian with a look that let me know that he was fully aware of what Wei Wuxian was doing and would hold him accountable later. But he relented.

“I will order for Wei Ying,” Lan Zhan stated flatly, suiting action to word by standing and sweeping out of the room to go and request breakfast.

Wei Wuxian let out a slow breath as the door closed behind Lan Wangji. There was an intensity to Lan Wangji’s focus on him that Wei Wuxian didn’t know how to read. He felt like the man was aware of Wei Wuxian’s every move, noticing any tiny tell about what he was thinking or how he was feeling.

It was disconcerting.

Had it always been this way? Wei Wuxian didn’t think so. Back when Wei Wuxian had been a student at Cloud Recesses, all he had wanted was for Lan Wangji to pay attention to him. He didn’t even really know *why* he had wanted it so much, only that he had a visceral need to get Lan Wangji to react and engage with him.

He supposed it made sense. Lan Wangji was the first person he’d ever met near his age who had been his equal both in terms of academics and swordplay. To Wei Wuxian, it had only made sense that they should be close friends. Lan Wangji hadn’t seemed to agree, mostly just finding Wei Wuxian annoying and scolding him at every turn.

But now, Lan Wangji was watching him with the same intensity that Wei Wuxian used to watch Lan Wangji.

And Wei Wuxian didn't know what to make of it.

Lan Wangji returned, followed by a servant carrying a large tray filled with food. As the man unloaded the dishes onto the table, Wei Wuxian notices that it has his favorite tea, and spicy congee as well as some steamed meat buns. Definitely not GusuLan cuisine. Lan Wangji also clearly ordered breakfast for himself as well, but well over half of the food here is aligned to Wei Wuxian's tastes.

"Lan Zhan!" Wei Wuxian exclaimed, his mouth watering at the scent of the spices coming from two of the bowls as the servant left them to their meal. "How did you know these were my favorites?"

"No speaking during meals," Lan Wangji replied primly, but the tips of his ears were pink.

"This isn't Cloud Recesses." Wei Wuxian laughed, sitting down and picking up a steamed bun. He would never take clean food for granted again, though his childhood had also taught him that lesson.

Lan Wangji shot him a look but didn't reply. Wei Wuxian at least finished chewing and swallowing before he continued. He was ok breaking some rules, but he did have *some* manners.

"So… you and Jiang Cheng are friends now? I didn't see that coming."

Lan Wangji gave him a look that could have peeled the paint off the walls as he continued to delicately eat his breakfast in silence.

"Ok, ok. Not friends then. But you seemed pretty comfortable working together. It definitely wasn't the first night hunt you'd been on with him. When did all that happen?"

Lan Wangji takes a sip of his tea before giving up on having silence during his meal. "We had a common cause."

Wei Wuxian chewed thoughtfully. "Yeah. I guess. But a lot of people hate the Wen, and Wen Chao in particular. I don't really see how that landed you two showing up at his hiding place attached at the hip to each other."

Another layer of paint was peeled from the poor inn's walls before Lan Wangji replied with words rather than glares.

"We didn't start off looking for Wen Chao," Lan Wangji said, his voice calm and controlled in a way that Wei Wuxian knew meant the man was actually upset.

Wei Wuxian frowned trying to imagine what would be important enough that the sect heir of GusuLan and the sect heir of YunmengJiang would be called to work together, when they certainly hadn't in the past. Imminent war was easy to understand, but it was hard to come up with something else that could explain it.

“So… another monster?” Wei Wuxian asked, mentally calculating the likelihood of another legendary monster being summoned so close to the *Xiangliu* and finding it exceedingly unlikely.

Lan Wangji’s fingers tightened imperceptibly on his tea cup.

“Your message.”

Wei Wuxian nodded slowly. “Ah, right. You needed to warn Lotus Pier when you found out about the toxin. Hey, good job at figuring out my shitty message, by the way! I was so pissed that I didn’t have enough *qi* to get anything more detailed. But of course, Hanguan-Jun was able to figure it all out! Were you able to find the spy in time?”

Lan Wangji looked at him for a moment, his face utterly unreadable. The silence stretched for several seconds before he replied. “Su She.”

“I was worried you might have misinterpreted it to mean Wen Qing. But I trusted you would figure it out. What happened to Su She?”

Lan Wangji looked down into his tea. “Wen Qing was with me when I received your message. She helped us with the toxin. It was clear she was not the spy. The punishment for treason during war is permanent expulsion from the sect and all GusuLan territory or fifty lashes with the discipline whip.”

Wei Wuxian grimaced. He had never seen the whip used, but he had heard of it. He frowned as he took in Lan Wangji’s words. “Wait. I thought that people don’t survive more than twenty lashes.”

Lan Wangji gave him a flat look. “They do not.”

Wei Wuxian took a sip of his tea. He didn’t feel sorry for whoever this Su She was, if the man had betrayed his clan to the Wen. But given that he was heading into GusuLan territory after committing what he knew the elders would consider an unforgivable breach of cultivation rules, it gave him pause. It was a stark reminder that - for all that GusuLan put on a face of politeness, elegance, and control - they were a brutal clan.

They finished their breakfast in silence, the mood heavy in the room.

Wei Wuxian realized his original question hadn’t really been answered. “Wait. So I get that you had to go to Lotus Pier to let them know about the toxin, but how did that end with you and Jiang Cheng going on hunts together?”

Lan Wangji stood, then walked over to Wei Wuxian’s bed to straighten the disheveled blankets, even though there would be servants there shortly to change the bedding for the next guest.

“We were looking for you. Or… your... body.” Lan Wangji’s voice had gone back to the painfully controlled monotone he used to conceal any emotional inflection.

Wei Wuxian grimaced. “Yeah. I guess… that butterfly was in pretty bad shape.”

Lan Wangji nodded tightly. “Shortly after that, Wen Chao had your sword delivered.”

‘Right.” Wei Wuxian didn’t really know how he felt about the fact that Jiang Cheng and Lan Wangji had actually spent time looking for his body. They must have had a lot more pressing things to do, given the Wen threat that they had just been made aware of. Had Jiang Fengmian actually *allowed* his heir to go hunt for someone his sect had disavowed? And GusuLan might have softened its opinion of Wei Wuxian after the Slaughter Tortoise, but would they really have found looking for a single rogue cultivator the best use of Hanguang-Jun’s time?

It made no sense, but the taut look on Lan Wangji’s face made asking more questions seem cruel.. Lan Wangji should never look this… distraught. Especially not over some rogue cultivator that didn’t have any ties at all to GusuLan except for the distinction of having been the only disciple to be kicked out of the guest lectures. It made Wei Wuxian’s stomach twist into knots. All he ever managed to do was upset people and make them feel like shit.

Lan Wangji was too good of a person, too kind to care for every reckless cultivator who crossed his path like this. Every war had casualties, and Lan Wangji would have to be able to handle it. Perhaps the man had been equally upset at the loss of life when Cloud Recesses was attacked. Like everyone else of their generation, this was Lan Wangji’s first experience with war. He would have felt responsible for protecting the people in his sect, but Wei Wuxian was not Lan Wangji’s responsibility.

A sudden realization struck him.

“It wasn’t your fault. You know that, right?” Wei Wuxian said urgently, walking up to Lan Wangji and gripping his forearm tightly. Lan Wangji froze in the middle of smoothing out the blanket, his eyes locking on to where Wei Wuxian’s hand wrapped around his arm.

Wei Wuxian could feel the man’s muscles tense beneath his grip, but he didn’t let go. It was important that Lan Wangji believe him.

“You and Jiang Cheng both did the right thing by returning to your sects to warn them. It wasn’t your fault that Wen Chao found me. Just shitty luck on my part.”

Lan Wangji’s eyes did not lift from where Wei Wuxian’s hand gripped him, his body frozen as though carved from the rigid, flawless stone he was nick-named after.

“I should not have left Wei Ying,” he said after several moments, his voice low.

“No.” Wei Wuxian tugged on his arm, forcing Lan Wangji to turn and face him. “No, Lan Zhan. You did the right thing. You had to warn your clan. No war is free of casualties or injuries. As cultivators, we take that risk with every night hunt, even during peacetime. If you hadn’t found me after the *Xiangliu,* I would have already been dead. I knew the odds were bad going in. It’s not on you. You can’t take the blame for everyone who gets hurt, Lan Zhan. Even for a cultivator as strong as you, it isn’t possible.”

Lan Wangji’s amber eyes held a level of rawness that Wei Wuxian did not know how to understand nor respond to. He could feel a tremor wrack Lan Wangjis’ frame from where his hand still gripped the other man’s arm.

“I should not have left Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji repeated, his voice so low that Wei Wuxian could almost not hear it.

Wei Wuxian's chest felt like he possibly had been stabbed in the heart, somehow, without noticing. "Lan Zhan. Look. I'm ok. It's fine."

Wei Wuxian grabbed Lan Wangji's hand, continuing to completely disregard the man's known aversion to any physical contact outside of training and battle, and placed it over his heart. Lan Wangji's large, strong hand splayed out flat, the palm pressed tightly against Wei Wuxian's breast bone. The solid beat of Wei Wuxian's heart would be easily detectable through the sensitive, tapered fingers of the musical cultivator.

Lan Wangji stared at where his hand pressed against the black robes he had given Wei Wuxian so many months ago. The fabric was worn, even its high quality not being enough to stand up to three months exposure to the forces of the Burial Mounds.

"How did you survive?" Lan Wangji's words were muted, almost inaudible.

Wei Wuxian swallowed. He didn't really want to talk about that. He didn't want to think about it. But even moreso, he didn't want Lan Wangji to think about it.

Lan Wangji was too pure for the Burial Mounds to touch, even if it was only through second hand memories. He gave as short an answer as he could, while still being truthful.

"I don't really know. At first I thought I wouldn't but then…," Wei Wuxian shrugged. Lan Wangji didn't need to hear the details of it. "I somehow did. And then, after a while, it let me leave."

Lan Wangji looked at him, almost as though he were looking through him. "No one has ever survived. No cultivator, no matter how strong."

Wei Wuxian didn't really know what to say. Lan Wangji spoke the truth, and Wei Wuxian didn't have an explanation. "I just… I listened to them."

"Them?"

"The spirits. In the Burial Mounds. They aren't really evil. Just… they've had terrible things happen to them."

Lan Wangji's level of concern did not seem to be eased by Wei Wuxian's words. The tiny furrow between his brows reappeared, but whether in concern or judgement, Wei Wuxian couldn't tell.

"There are thousands of spirits trapped in the Burial Mounds," Lan Wangji said at last.

"Yes? I guess so?" Wei Wuxian thought back, trying to parse out the different voices and stories he'd heard.

"And you listened to all of them."

Lan Wangji's hand pressed harder against Wei Wuxian's heart, as though trying to force the truth from him.

Wei Wuxian suddenly felt overwhelmed by the closeness, his own senses still easily overwhelmed after months of being completely alone. He stepped back, breaking the contact

between them. Lan Wangji's hand fisted before moving behind his back, his face returning to a thick, unreadable mask.

Wei Wuxian felt the loss of contact, but was not able to make himself re-bridge the gap. He was confused as much by the point behind Lan Wangji's question as well as the fact that the man hadn't been the one to pull away from him when he had always been so uncomfortable with any type of physical contact. He tried to at least answer Lan Wangji's question, as a partial apology for upsetting him.

"Yeah. I mean, I don't know if I heard every single one but… most of them. Probably."

Lan Wangji drew a breath, his eyes closing in a slow, extended blink before re-opening.

"Even letting in the voice of one spirit, without the intermediary of a spiritual instrument, is extremely dangerous. To both the mind and the body."

Wei Wuxian felt himself tense. "I am aware of the GusuLan's opinions on this, Lan Zhan. But it's not like I had a fucking *choice* . It was let them in, or let them suffocate me."

Wei Wuxian turned sharply, grabbing his pouch and flute before walking toward the door. He was totally overwhelmed and unsure of his own thoughts about what he was even doing following Lan Wangji when everything pointed to him not being welcomed by the sect.

Not remaining welcomed by Lan Wangji.

Everything Wei Wuxian had told Lan Wangji about what had happened had only made the man more upset. He didn't know what Lan Wangji wanted, and he couldn't tell how much of Lan Wangji's reaction was judgement or misplaced worry. It felt like a crushing combination of both. He didn't even know what was going on inside his own head anymore, much less being able to read someone else. There were just too many things to process, after months of endless sameness and isolation.

He needed to get outside and breathe.

"We should leave. You need to warn your sect, and I need to let Wen Qing know I'm not actually dead."

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji called after him as he left, but Wei Wuxian could not turn to see the expression on the man's face. He already had so many emotions twisting inside him, most of which he couldn't even name, and he couldn't take on trying to interpret Lan Wangji at the same time.

Maybe by the time they reached Caiyi Town, Wei Wuxian would no longer feel as though he was being suffocated from the inside out. He vaguely heard Lan Wangji letting the innkeeper know that they were leaving. Wei Wuxian mounted *Suibian* , feeling the moment Lan Wangji stepped outside and did the same.

The voices in Wei Wuxian's head were much quieter now that the majority of the resentful energy had been purged from his body, but he could still feel them warning him not to let his guard down as they headed for GusuLan territory.

To be continued...

A/N - so... Caiyi and Cloud Recesses are coming up next. One of the things I wondered a lot about in canon was, the first time that Lan Wangji asked Wei Wuxian to come back to Cloud Recesses with him, would he really have stood up for him against his sect leaders at that time? Obviously, much later in the story we know how this plays out but I have a pretty strong hypothesis in my head about it and (which you will see next chapter) and I am curious what other people think. CQL or novel canon. Hope you are all managing to stay safe and sane (or relatively sane) in this crazy world we have right now.

Chapter 15: Trust

A/N - I know this is super lame but like… it is so much fun to read everyone's comments, especially to each other, because it makes me feel like I'm not still living in lock-down LOLOL. I forgot what conversations look like.

Wei Wuxian had known, intellectually, that Caiyi Town had been destroyed by the Wen in the failed attack on Cloud Recesses. He was still not prepared for the reality of the scene. The rubble had largely been cleared, and the dead buried, but there was a silence in what used to be a cheerful, bustling town that sat in Wei Wuxian's stomach like lead. Several of the town's buildings that had not been destroyed had already been repaired, particularly those on the far side of the town from where the Wen had attacked But many of the homes and shops were now replaced with tents and make-shift shelters that would definitely not be enough to protect the inhabitants from winter, once it arrived. Fortunately, they were only in late spring, giving them the summer to rebuild.

The two men were silent as they dismounted from their swords. Wei Wuxian could feel the muted flickers of resentment and anguish from the battle. The fact that the dead had been properly acknowledged and laid to rest had definitely helped, but had not fully erased their pain. Maybe only the defeat of the Wen and the full rebuilding of their town could achieve that. Faces of the locals that Wei Wuxian had bought loquats or wine from in the past, people he'd joked or flirted with just for fun, swirled through his memory. Were any of them still alive? They must have been so frightened, being attacked by powerful cultivators for no reason other than they happened to make their livelihood near the edge of a group of *other* powerful cultivators. And just for that, they'd had their lives ripped apart, possibly even ended. It wasn't right. It wasn't -

"Wei Ying." Lan Wangji's hand closed over Wei Wuxian's where he was gripping the hilt of *Suibian* .

Wei Wuxian could feel his heart pounding, the ridges of *Suibian* 's hilt digging into the palm of his hand. The warmth of Lan Wangji's hand wrapped around his grounded him. He forced his grip to loosen and drew a slow breath, trying to clear his mind.

"Lan Zhan. Sorry. I'm good."

Lan Wangji studied him for a moment before nodding and releasing his hand. Despite the warmth of the late spring sun, Wei Wuxian's hand felt cold.

"One of the larger inns survived the Wen attack. You may rest there. I will send word for Wen Qing, A-Yuan and Wen Ning to meet us there."

Wei Wuxian felt a tightness ease in his chest that he hadn't realized was there. Lan Wangji wasn't going to force the issue of Wei Wuxian refusing to enter Cloud Recesses. But then another thought struck him, and he kicked himself mentally for not having realized this sooner.

"Shit. Lan Zhan, you said that Wen Qing was with you when you received my message when I was falling into the Burial Mounds, right?"

Lan Wangji's face stilled for a moment, his lips parting slightly on what sounded like a tiny, anguished gasp. "Wei Ying sent the message… while he was *falling* ?"

Wei Wuxian gave a half-laugh, not really knowing what to say.

"I, uh, didn't figure I'd survive the fall, so I didn't have a lot of choice in the timing,"

"Wei Ying." Lan Wangji's voice was pained in a way that Wei Wuxian didn't understand.

"Lan Zhan. Don't worry, ok? It ended up all fine. I survived the fall and made it out ok. And you got the heads up about the spy and the toxin so it all was ok."

Lan Wangji closed his eyes briefly, clearly gathering himself.

"Anyway, I just realized that if Wen Qing was with you when you got my shitty butterfly, she probably thinks I'm dead, too. Which means she's going to actually kill me when she finds out I didn't let her know right away. Does… does A-Yuan think I'm dead?"

Lan Wangji opened his eyes, then gave a slight head shake. "No. We didn't want to tell him until it was confirmed."

Relief washed through Wei Wuxian. The last thing he wanted would be to cause pain to A-Yuan, on top of everything else. "Yeah. He was probably so excited about all the new things to see in Cloud Recesses that he didn't even notice I was gone!"

Lan Wangji shot him a narrow look. "He asked for you almost every day, but we told him you were night hunting and weren't back yet."

Wei Wuxian looked down, trying to hold back the memories of waiting for his own parents to return from their final night hunt. At least A-Yuan had people looking after him. He hadn't gone hungry, or spent nights alone, afraid of what might find him in the streets or the forests.

He felt an overwhelming need to see A-Yuan and verify for himself that the child was alright. He locked two of his fingers together, channeling his *qi* into them. He could feel tiny crackles in his spiritual pathways from the resentful energy he'd accidentally drawn in when they reached Caiyi Town and his emotions had overwhelmed him. The pinpricks were quickly washed away by the strong, steady flood of his Yang energy and he was able to send a perfectly formed messenger butterfly off to Wen Qing.

"No point in waiting for you to go get her and come back," Wei Wuxian said. "I told her to bring A-Yuan and Wen Ning and meet me at the inn at the far side of town." Wei Wuxian felt a flood of happiness at the thought of seeing his friends again, but it was tamped down as he remembered the main reason that they had come.

"I guess you should go find your brother and the elders and let them know what's happening," Wei Wuxian said, not specifying whether it was the Wen battle plans or his own new cultivation path. Lan Wangji would need to explain both, so there was no point.

Lan Wangji surprisingly hesitated a moment, then gave a short nod. "I will walk you to the inn to make sure there is space for you. Then I will go find Brother and Uncle."

Wei Wuxian chewed his lower lip. “Actually…,” he began, not really wanting to offend Lan Wangji but knowing this was the best way. “It’s probably better if you don’t come with me.”

Lan Wangji’s face gave no sign of what was going through his head.

“Why?”

Wei Wuxian shrugged. “If they ask you where I am, then you can honestly say you don’t know. The inn may have space, or it may not. You won’t have to lie. And I won’t have to worry about Lan guards showing up to try to drag me away.”

Neither man mentioned the fact that Wei Wuxian had said “try”. Wei Wuxian had made it clear he would not go willingly.

“They would not. I will explain,” Lan Wangji said earnestly.

Wei Wuxian gave a small smile, but it did not reach his eyes. “Lan Zhan. I know you trust your elders and believe that they will always choose the right path. But I don’t share that same faith. I only trust Lan Zhan. If I had to face a judgement that you passed down, I would go with you right now.”

“Wei Ying.” The tips of Lan Wangji’s ears were pink, but Wei Wuxian was not finished.

“But your elders are not as careful in their judgement as Lan Zhan. They only look at the rules, and some of the rules conflict with each other.”

Lan Wangji did not dispute this. It was a discussion that they’d had in the past, and he knew that Lan Wangji saw some of the same conflicts that Wei Wuxian did.

“I will not put myself at their mercy, when I have never seen them to have any. If your sect sends soldiers against me, I will fight them. Neither of us wants that.”

Lan Wangji’s jaw tightened, clearly not liking what Wei Wuxian was saying, but he gave a short nod. “They will not send soldiers. But I do not want Wei Ying to worry. I will not walk with you to the inn.” Lan Wangji paused. “But I know where you will be headed.”

Wei Wuxian gave him a smile that actually reached his eyes. “Lan Zhan. I am planning on hunting down the Wen soldiers as soon as possible. Neither of us have any idea how long I will be here. It could be five minutes.”

Lan Wangji’s brow creased slightly in dislike of that notion.

“Lan Zhan. You need to be able to answer your elders honestly that you don’t know where I am. I am telling you that I will not be staying at the inn. Therefore, you do not know where I will be, other than that our final destination will be Lotus Pier.”

Lan Wangji was uncomfortable with prevarication of any sort, so Wei Wuxian was somewhat surprised when the man nodded. “You are telling me that you might leave before I have a chance to tell the elders where I last saw you.”

“Yes. I am telling you now that I am not staying in Caiyi Town. I accompanied you to check on my friends, then I will be immediately leaving town and you will have no idea where I will be, other than my general plan to take out the smaller Wen forces I encounter to aid Lotus Pier.”

There was a flash of panic in Lan Wangji’s eyes. “

"Lan Zhan. It’s ok. I promise I will allow Wen Qing to treat me before I leave, but I’m just not telling you the exact location it will take place. You saw me send the butterfly message to her. Do you think you can reproduce it?”

“Mm.” Some of the tension went out of Lan Wangji’s frame.

Wei Wuxian beamed at him. “Of course Lan Zhan would only need to see it once.”

“Wei Ying was the one who invented it.”

Wei Wuxian laughed. “Alright. Enough trading compliments. Go warn your sect and let me know if they want to help me or punish me.”

“They will help Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji said firmly, as though any other option were impossible. Wei Wuxian wished that he still had faith in others to that extent, but he had learned otherwise long ago.

“Hm,” Wei Wuxian replied, the skepticism heavy in his tone.

Lan Wangji looked at him a moment more before turning and heading up the path to Cloud Recesses. Wei Wuxian watched him for a moment before turning and heading in the opposite direction, towards the inn where he had told Wen Qing to meet him.

Wei Wuxian was browsing the selection of summer robes at one of the vendors just down the street from the inn that Lan Wangji had directed him to. His current robes were worn through in spots, but still too thick to face the late spring heat that would be waiting for him in Lotus Pier. He purchased two sets of thin black outer robes, and even thinner sets of blood red inner robes. There were nowhere near as high quality as the ones Lan Wangji had given him, but he didn’t have the money to spend frivolously. Besides, he was headed to battle. The Lans seemed fine wearing fancy clothes no matter what activity they were doing, but Wei Wuxian was too poor to be impractical.

Once the purchase was made, he scanned the rest of the part of town that was still standing. There was another, smaller inn that looked like it was also up and running, but Wei Wuxian decided against it. If the Lans were going to come for him, he wasn’t going to be caught sleeping in his bed.

He hadn’t lied when he said he trusted Lan Wangji. If Lan Wangji honestly felt Wei Wuxian deserved punishment, even death, Wei Wuxian might be able to accept that fate. Lan Wangji was the most fair man Wei Wuxian had ever known. He looked at both what was done, but also why it had happened. If he felt Wei Wuxian’s actions were condemnable, then maybe they were. But Lan Wangji had said he didn’t feel that way. Wei Wuxian wasn’t interested in whether Lan Qiren felt the same.

As honest and pure as Lan Wangji was, however, he was also loyal and filial. It was part of who he was, down to the very marrow of his bones. If Lan Qiren and the elders said that Wei Wuxian should be whipped to death for violating their beliefs on cultivating resentful energy, Wei Wuxian didn't know how Lan Wangji would respond. And - more importantly - he never wanted to put Lan Wangji in the position of choosing between loyalty to his sect and standing up for Wei Wuxian.

"Xian-gege! Xiang-gege! You're here!"

Wei Wuxian turned at the sound of A-Yuan's joyful shout as the small boy raced down the street, immediately launching himself at Wei Wuxian's legs. Wei Wuxian's heavy thoughts evaporated under the sweet smile of the child looking up at him adoringly.

"Did A-Yuan miss his Xian-gege?" Wei Wuxian asked, crouching down to speak with him.

"Yes!" The boy answered, then let out a shriek of happiness as Wei Wuxian picked him up and blew a raspberry into the side of his neck.

"I missed you, too," Wei Wuxian said, hugging the boy close, feeling the solid proof that A-Yuan had not been killed, had not been abandoned, had not starved while he was gone. His eyes prickled, but he drew a breath and steadied himself so as not to alarm the child.

Wei Wuxian had trouble accepting praise or trusting any sort of displays of affection from most people in his life. He had learned the hard way that most such things were temporary, if they were ever genuine to begin with.

A-Yuan was too young for any of that, and Wei Wuxian let the honesty of the child's emotions flow into him, soothing his spirit.

"If you missed him so much, couldn't you have sent a note or *something* to let us all know you weren't dead?" Wen Qing's sharp tone was betrayed by the look of relief and concern in her gaze as her eyes methodically assessed Wei Wuxian. She and her brother walked up to where Wei Wuxian was standing with A-Yuan's tiny arms wrapped tightly around his neck, as though afraid Wei Wuxian was going to disappear again.

"Ah, sorry," Wei Wuxian said, buzzing a soft kiss into A-Yuan's hair. "I was… not somewhere I could send a message. I tried."

Wen Ning's eyes were glassy with tears, a soft smile on his lips. "I'm glad you are ok, Wei-gongzi. We thought…," Wen Ning looked over at A-Yuan, who was playing happily with the strands of Wei Wuxian's hair that were spilling out of his messy half-bun.

Wei Wuxian grimaced slightly. "Yeah. Lan Zhan told me about what that asshole Wen Chao said when he brought my sword."

Wen Ning looked down, clearly distressed.

"Asshole," A-Yuan parroted, looking pleased with himself when Wei Wuxian let out a groan.

"Don't say that word. You'll get me in trouble and I just got back."

A-Yuan giggled as Wei Wuxian tickled him, but Wen Qing's eyes narrowed.

"There aren't many places where you would be unable to send a message, with the talisman you use," Wen Qing stated.

Wei Wuxian gave a short look towards A-Yuan. "I know."

Wen Qing took the hint not to discuss it in front of the child. While most children in GusuLan A-Yuan's age would have no idea what the Burial Mounds were, A-Yuan had grown up near Yiling, and had heard horror stories about the place since he was old enough to speak.

Wen Ning looked from his sister to Wei Wuxian and back again, realizing he was missing something. Then his eyes widened in horror. "Oh, no. Senior Wei!"

Wei Wuxian smiled, not wanting Wen Ning to be upset. "Don't worry, A-Ning. It's fine."

"But how? No one has ever -," Wen Ning cut off at a sharp gesture from his sister.

"Hey, are you guys hungry? I'm starving," Wei Wuxian said, bouncing A-Yuan in his arms to try to lighten the mood.

"Starving!" A-Yuan agreed.

"But you just had a snack less than half an hour ago," Wen Ning replied.

"Starving," A-Yuan repeated, his small face extremely serious.

"Well! We can't have A-Yuan starve to death, can we?" Wei Wuxian teased, then turned towards where some of the vendors had set up make-shift food cards on the street. "Let's buy some food and take it up the mountain a little bit for a picnic. What do you say, A-Yuan?"

"Picnic!" The boy called out happily, though he may or may not have known what a picnic was.

Wen Qing and Wen Ning had no objections, likely guessing that Wei Wuxian wanted to have a conversation with fewer people listening. The fact that he also wanted to be less easy for anyone to find, should they come looking for him, was probably not on their radar yet, but Wei Wuxian would need to let them know.

They purchased several different types of steamed buns and rice cakes, easy finger food for dining outside, then a small blanket to lay it all out on. As the small group walked out of town, Wei Wuxian looked back over his shoulder at Cloud Recesses, wondering how Lan Wangji's conversation with the Lan sect elders was going.

He wished he could believe it was going well.

Wei Wuxian had spent enough time in and around Cloud Recesses that he knew a convenient spot that was less than a fifteen minute walk from town, and had some nice, flat rocks to sit on and was near a spring.

They caught up while they ate. It was a little early for lunch, but the food would be better hot and Wen Qing had caught on to the fact that Wei Wuxian was looking to get out of the town for a while. Both Wen Qing and Wen Ning seemed on a mission to get Wei Wuxian to eat as much as possible. Clearly, they had been spending too much time around Lan Wangji.

He learned that Wen Ning had recovered from the toxin, though his lungs were likely to remain weak for the rest of his life. Wen Ning and Wen Qing had kept mostly away from the other cultivators in Cloud Recesses, though they had fought along-side the Lans when the Wen had attacked. Wen Qing believed that there were a good number of Lan cultivators who knew they were Wen, but no one had given them problems because of their actions during the attack. But they didn't want to tempt fate, so they continued to wear the Lan disciple robes, and stay out of the way.

It wasn't as easy to keep an active little boy cooped up, but A-Yuan had managed to charm pretty everyone in both Cloud Recesses and Caiyi Town. Wei Wuxian frowned at the idea of A-Yuan being so exposed, with tensions running high because of the war. Caiyi Town had been nearly destroyed by Wen, and there were plenty of people not enlightened enough to realize it was wrong to hold a child responsible for the acts of others of his blood.

"Everyone just knows him as A-Yuan," Wen Ning said, reassuringly. "Hanguang-Jun and Zewu-Jun always call him that, and no one has asked about his surname."

Wei Wuxian looked over to where A-Yuan was crouched down, watching a caterpillar crawl across a leaf with rapt fascination. "So they just… think he sprung from the ground at Lan Zhan's feet?"

Wen Qing gave him a look. "I think they think he's an orphan that Hanguang-Jun brought back from a night hunt."

Wei Wuxian wasn't sure how he felt about that. Would that make A-Yuan Lan Wangji's child? There could be no better father than Lan Wangji, but somehow, Wei Wuxian had sort of hoped…

Well. It didn't matter. It's not like he was in any sort of place to adopt A-Yuan himself. He had no home, no sect, and was probably on his way to becoming banned or potentially even a wanted criminal in Cloud Recesses not to mention heading off to war.

Lan Wangji was the better choice to provide stability for A-Yuan.

"Look, look!" A-Yuan called, picking up the leave and carrying it over as fast as his chubby legs could manage. "It's biting on the leaf! It's having a picnic with us!"

They all smiled softly as the boy set the leaf (with the caterpillar) down on the blanket where the remains of their lunch were still spread. After a few moments of watching it, A-Yuan looked up and smiled at Wei Wuxian.

"I'm glad Pretty gege is back. Rich gege was sad while you were gone."

Wei Wuxian's eyebrows shot up in amusement. "Rich gege, eh?"

A-Yuan nodded. “Rich gege buys me LOTS of toys and treats. Because he is rich. And I am cute.”

Wei Wuxian was definitely going to tease Lan Wangji about that later. No matter how tight-laced Lan Wangji was, he was no match for the cuteness that was A-Yuan. A-Yuan was continuing his tales about his Rich gege.

“He looked so sad especially when he would play the song at night,” A-Yuan said, his words trailing off in a yawn as he climbed onto Wei Wuxian’s lap and settled against him.

“He played a song?” Wei Wuxian asked, looking up at Wen Ning and Wen Qing.

“Inquiry,” Wen Qing said softly. “After we got your butterfly. He tried to contact you.”

Wen Ning was looking down, shredding blades of grass listlessly with his fingers. Wei Wuxian felt a wave of guilt wash over him that so many people had been worried and upset because of him.

“Sorry,” he said softly, earning a sharp glare from Wen Qing.

“Don’t you say sorry!” she growled out, glancing down to where A-Yuan had drifted off to sleep. “Now I want to hear *exactly* what happened, and why you look like you’ve lost almost half your weight.”

Wei Wuxian *really* didn’t want to talk about it, but Wen Qing wasn’t the sort of person who let him get away with dodging questions. He ended up telling her a lot more than he had even told Lan Wangji or Jiang Cheng, in the end.

Wen Ning looked as though he had just found out his dog had died, staring at Wei Wuxian with large, sad eyes. Wen Qing looked slightly shaken, but she quickly focused on the parts of the story that she could actually do something about.

“Well, I guess that explains why you didn’t want to hang around at the doorstep of Cloud Recesses where everyone could see you,” she said briskly. “But that doesn’t explain why you are able to still carry *Suibian* .”

Wen Ning looked up at his sister curiously, and Wei Wuxian was grateful to see the sad look wiped off the younger man’s face even if he knew he was about to get in a shitload of trouble when he answered Wen Qing’s question. He didn’t know why he was surprised that Wen Qing had picked up on what he’d done so quickly. He shouldn’t be, given his past experiences with her.

“Why wouldn’t he be able to carry his sword?” Wen Ning asked.

“Because,” Wen Qing responded, not taking her eyes off Wei Wuxian’s. “If he had been steeped in the concentrated resentful energy of the Burial Mounds for three months, even if Hanguang-Jun was able to play Cleansing for him for another three months straight, his pathways would be too clogged with Yin energy to allow the Yang energy from his golden core to flow.”

Wei Wuxian looked down at A-Yuan sleeping peacefully in his lap and desperately wished he could join him.

“Wei Wuxian,” Wen Qing said warningly.

“Ahaha, Wen Qing! You are so smart. Would you believe it if I told you that Lan Wangji is just such an amazing guqin player that all it took was one night?”

Wen Qing’s hand moved so quickly he could barely see it as she whipped her hand forward and pressed two fingers to Wei Wuxian’s chest right above his breastbone. “No. I wouldn’t even believe it if you told me he dual-cultivated the resentful energy out of you for a week straight using his own Yang energy.”

Wei Wuxian felt his face blaze in response to the graphic images her words elicited. When Wen Ning asked if that would actually work, Wei Wuxian found himself choking on his own spit.

“Don’t say stuff like that! Lan Zhan would never!” Wei Wuxian spluttered as Wen Ning snickered.

Wen Qing smirked but didn’t take her focus from where her fingers pressed against Wei Wuxian’s chest.

“Your meridians are inflamed.” She narrowed a look at Wei Wuxian as she pulled her hand away. “You fucking *idiot.* You burned the Yin energy out using your own golden core. Do you have any *idea* what could have happened if you got the flow wrong and pulled the Yin energy into your core without preparing it?”

All inappropriate thoughts of Lan Wangji fucking the resentment out of him fled under the force of Wen Qing’s wrath.

“What? No. But I’m guessing not something good based on your expression.”

Wen Qing rolled her eyes. “How you got the reputation for being a genius is something I will never understand.”

“Hey!”

“Since you already have been experimenting with it, you must have found out that Yin and Yang energy will aggressively neutralize each other if left collided in an uncontrolled way.”

Wei Wuxian’s attention was caught by her choice of wording. “Wait. So there is a way to control it so they *don’t* neutralize each other?”

Wen Qing looked like she wanted to grab one of her needles.

“Not for idiots who don’t know what the fuck they’re doing. And if I catch you experimenting on it without doing proper research first, I will personally block every single spiritual pathway in your body with a very large fistful of needles.”

Wen Qing was not a woman who made threats she couldn’t back up.

Wei Wuxian nodded obediently.

Wen Ning continued to snicker.

"*Qi* flows like water. Which means it goes in the direction of least resistance. If you had opened your golden core while it was depleted, there wouldn't have been enough spiritual pressure to keep the Yin energy out. It would have flowed into your core and reacted with the Yang energy there, potentially destroying your core. Permanently."

The words were a bucket of cold water splashed on him. Damaged pathways could sometimes be repaired, or - if not - at least worked around by using other pathways. A burned out core was end game.

Wei Wuxian placed his hand over where his golden core was located, realizing it had only been a sort of half instinct that had made him hesitate trying to use his golden core before it had had a chance to replenish when he first came out of the Burial Mounds. He had not realized at the time how close he'd come to losing his core.

Wen Qing watched his face, seeming satisfied with what she saw there. "Good. You understand. So be careful. That being said, the fact that you are able to wield both Yin and Yang energy can be a benefit to your overall cultivation."

"Because I can raise a spirit army to take out as many cultivators as I want?" He asked, a dark smile twisting his features.

Wen Qing arched an eyebrow. "Your undead army won't stop my needle from finding your neck if you get too full of yourself."

Wei Wuxian threw his head back and laughed, feeling unaccountably relieved at her boldness. Most people would fear him and his new abilities. Wen Qing did not. He was exceptionally grateful for her friendship.

"Seriously. Working with Yin energy can provide the same benefits as cultivating with a partner's Yang energy," Wen Qing stated.

At Wei Wuxian's confused look, she continued. "How, exactly, do you think dual cultivation works?"

Wei Wuxian shrugged uncomfortably. "I mean… it's sharing your qi with your partner during sex, right?"

Wen Qing sighed exasperatedly. "That's always the part that people fixate on. If it was just sex, or even just sharing energy *during* sex, why would that help with cultivation strength to the point that people used it as a short cut to immortality?"

Wei Wuxian had never given it much thought, not having expected to have a cultivation partner. He'd actually thought it was more myth than reality until he'd heard that Lan Wangji was planning on taking a cultivation partner and the cultivation world had gone wild gossiping about who his partner would end up being, or trying to be that partner themselves. (And if Wei Wuxian felt a fierce wave satisfaction that Wen Chao was dead and would never insult Lan Wangji again by thinking he was the man's equal, no one needed to know that but Wei Wuxian himself).

Wen Qing took his silence as answer enough and continued. "Having two streams of energy flowing through your spiritual pathways will strengthen and widen them, if done carefully and with a partner of equal cultivation power so the flow can be controlled. If the partners are truly

compatible, they can even allow the other's qi into their core, and it will stretch the core as well without damaging it."

Wei Wuxian's eyes widened. Growing one's golden core took years and years of dedicated concentration, but even the most dedicated cultivators plateaued in their core's growth. The size of one's core determined the total amount of power a cultivator could carry, and the strength of the pathways determined how much could be released in a single attack. The fact that dual cultivation increased both of these things suddenly made it much clearer why Lan Wangji had considered this path, before war broke out and everything went to hell.

"So why doesn't everyone do it?" Wei Wuxian asked. Wen Ning nodded, wondering the same thing.

"Two reasons. First, That level of qi compatibility, however, is *extremely* rare. At most, one or two couples in a generation could actually match sufficiently to pull it off. Think soul mate kind of compatibility. Second, remember what I told you about qi flowing like water," Wen Qing replied. "The cultivation partners have to be nearly perfectly equally matched in both core size and flow of qi, or they risk a pressure imbalance and burning out the weaker cultivator's core."

"Ah. Shit." Well that basically ruled out Wei Wuxian ever finding a cultivation partner. The only people he'd ever met who had cores as strong as his were usually bloodline leaders or heirs to their sects. "Well, you said that I could use Yin energy in the same way?"

"Not to grow your core. That's too dangerous, and I've never heard of it being attempted without destroying the cultivator's golden core. But you can strengthen your pathways."

"But couldn't he burn out his core if he made a mistake?" Wen Ning asked his sister, concerned.

"Yes. Which is why almost no one tries it. But if he's going to be messing around with resentful energy anyway, he might as well know what he's actually doing," Wen Qing retorted.

Wei Wuxian nodded slowly, wishing more than ever that he wasn't most likely in the process of being banned for life from Cloud Recesses. He really needed to find out more about this, and the library at Cloud Recesses would have been extremely helpful.

"The sun is starting to set," Wen Qing said, looking down where A-Yuan was beginning to stir from his nap. "Do you want to go back to Caiyi Town for the night?"

Wei Wuxian looked over towards Cloud Recesses. It was nearing dinner time for the Lans, and he still hadn't heard from Lan Wangji. A-Yuan woke up and looked around sleepily. He would soon be hungry, and the nights in the mountains were still chilly. But Wei Wuxian could not go back to town.

"No," Wei Wuxian replied.

"There is an abandoned house further up the mountain," Wen Ning offered. Wen Qing looked at him in surprise. "It belonged to an older man who was killed in the Wen attack. No one has been there in months because it was isolated and vulnerable to attack if the Wen returned. I found it last week when I was looking for the herbs you asked me to get. I could go into town and pick up food to bring back for dinner. I do it often enough that no one would notice."

“He brings chicken!” A-Yuan piped up, making Wei Wuxian smile despite everything. He supposed getting used to bland, vegetarian food would take a bit of getting used to for the child.

Wei Wuxian had certainly never managed it.

“Sounds good. Let’s find this house before it gets dark,” Wei Wuxian said, shaking out the blanket and folding it up.

They all agreed and followed Wen Ning through the woods another fifteen minutes further away from the village. Luckily, it was warm enough that they wouldn’t need to start a fire, so there would be no signs that anyone was there from a distance.

It wasn’t an awesome place to hide, as people in the village definitely knew about it, but it was better than staying in town. He’d give Lan Wangji one more day to sort things out, then he’d go hunting for Wen mercenary camps.

He’d at least get one night with A-Yuan and his friends before he had to leave again.

To be continued...

A/N - work was hell last week trying to get everything done before the holiday break, but I am FINALLY DONE for the year and I have the next 2 weeks off. Hoping to catch up on replying to comments and writing on this as well as maybe picking one other AU to write. I have like 13 sketched out on gdocs and I want to try some sort of modern AU. Maybe? I actually even think I might try an omegaverse in this fandom which I usually don't like but there are so many jokes (and kinks) in canon that I am sort of here for it with wanxian. idk. Would that squick you guys out?

Chapter 16: A day of bad news

A/N - Thank you for all your amazing comments! I had meant to reply to them all before posting this but I got distracted because I wanted to check something up in canon and ended up getting sucked back in and rereading the whole novel and then watching some of the drama and... yeah. It's addictive, but I don't need to tell you all that. And I don't even remember what I was trying to double-check in the first place so WHATEVER.

Wei Wuxian ate dinner with the Wens in the small cabin that Wen Ning had led them to. A-Yuan was very excited to have chicken, and Wei Wuxian smiled at seeing the boy chattering happily while they ate. He wondered if A-Yuan would be made to eat in silence if Lan Wangji adopted him, but he supposed it was a small price to pay for safety. The thought of the strict Lan rules and how tightly they were monitored brought Wei Wuxian back to the risks of them being together.

“Won’t they notice that you’re all gone as well, if they come looking for me?” Wei Wuxian asked, eating the last bit of rice from his plate. Wen Qing frowned.

“A-Yuan won’t be an issue, as they don’t associate him with you,” Wen Qing replied.

Wei Wuxian flinched at her words, but he knew that what she was telling him was only the truth. It isn’t like anyone in Cloud Recesses knew how many times he’d visited the village that A-Yuan had grown up in, or how much he cared about the child. All things considered, it was actually for the best that A-Yuan wouldn’t be put at risk by being associated with him.

He still couldn’t help the way his chest squeezed at her words, though.

“A-Ning often goes out in the forest to gather herbs for me, or to practice his archery. His sleep schedule has been erratic since he was exposed to the toxin, so no one will think anything of it if he’s not in Cloud Recesses,” Wen Qing continued.

Wen Ning looked up at her. “JieJie is being kind. They would not think anything suspicious about me because they don’t even notice me. I’m not talented like JieJie.”

Wen Qing looked down guiltily, a flicker of pain and frustration flashing across her face. Wei Wuxina knew she loved her brother more than anything, but had never been able to protect him from the callous and cruel words of others.

“Well, that just shows that they’re not very observant,” Wei Wuxian declared, nudging Wen Ning’s foot with his.

Wen Ning looked up, surprised.

“I mean, seriously! You were the one who first spotted the signs of the *Xiangliu* . If you hadn’t shown it to me, Cloud Recesses and Lotus Pier would be fucked. You notice things, Wen Ning. And you’re smart enough to tell when something doesn’t look right. Plus you’re actually pretty amazing at archery, when no one is giving you trouble about it.”

Wen Ning looked down, his cheeks pink, but the disheartened look on his face was gone. Wen Qing sent Wei Wuxian a grateful look. It made Wei Wuxian wonder how bad it had been for them before if such a simple acknowledgement of Wen Ning's skills brought on such a reaction.

"Wei Wuxian is right, A-Ning. But the good news is, that means you and A-Yuan can stay the night with Wei Wuxian."

Wen Ning looked up at her. "You have to go back?"

Wen Qing nodded. "I should. The path home will take me past the building where the elders are likely to be discussing the situation. If they haven't cast a sound barrier charm, I will be able to get a sense of how it's going."

This time it's Wei Wuxian's turn to frown. "Don't put yourself at risk. The Wen have a lot of enemies, and Gusu is one of them. Right now, they're accepting you but that can change if they decide you're a threat."

Wei Wuxian had a lot of experience with people and sects changing their mind about him. In his experience, unless you were blood, you were expendable.

"I am Wen Ruohan's niece. Do you really think I have survived this long without knowing how to listen in without being observed?" Wen Qing pinned him with a look of steel.

Wei Wuxian felt a little of the tension ease out of him. Yes, Lan Qiren was strict and harsh, but he wasn't a paranoid megalomaniac the way Wen Ruohan was. There was a reason that the man didn't have strong generals, and that his sons were much weaker than him. Wen Ruohan took out every potential threat within his clan long before he set his sights on the rest of the cultivation world. If Wen Qing could not only survive Wen Ruohan but also protect her brother from him, then she was a force to be reckoned with.

"Just… be careful. Don't get hurt over someone like me," Wei Wuxian said.

Wen Qing's eyes flashed with temper, but she didn't reply.

"Wei Gongzi got hurt for me," Wen Ning said softly.

Wei Wuxian felt a wash of jittery tension rush through him at the direct gratitude. He did not have much experience with it, growing up at Lotus Pier, and it always felt uncomfortable - as though it were a mistake or a trick. Everything was either wrong, expected, insufficient, or too much. He didn't want Wen Ning to feel grateful, or in his debt. But he also didn't want to belittle the young man's already fragile ability to express his thoughts.

"Ahah, Wen Ning! But we have already discussed how amazing you are, so that is not the same thing. Anyway, we should finish dinner so A-Yuan can get some sleep and Wen Qing can go back and do her super elite listening techniques to hear all the trash Lan Qiren is talking about me."

Wen Qing rolled her eyes, then dished more food onto Wei Wuxian's plate. Wei Wuxian looked down at his full plate in surprise.

“You hardly ate anything, and kept giving food to the rest of us. Eat. Or people are going to mistake you for one of the restless spirits you made friends with.”

Wei Wuxian opened his mouth to argue, took a good look at the stern expression on Wen Qing’s face, then thought better of it and ate all the food she’d loaded onto his plate under her watchful eye.

When he’d finished, Wen Qing stood to take her leave.

“I might not be able to come back tomorrow, depending on how hard they are looking for you,” Wen Qing said as she pulled on her cloak.

“How about I show you how to send me a message?” Wei Wuxian asked. “You can also use it if you and Wen Ning ever get separated.”

Wen Qing’s eyebrows raised. “Are you supposed to be sharing sect secrets with an enemy clan?”

Wei Wuxian gave a mirthless smirk. “I don’t belong to a sect, so I can share my inventions with whomever I want.” His smile softened into a genuine one. “And you and Wen Ning are not my enemy, whatever sect claims you.”

Wen Qing took a slow breath, blinking rapidly. Wei Wuxian looked over to where A-Yuan and Wen Ning were playing some sort of game with sticks and pine cones that A-Yuan had likely brought back with him from their forest picnic, giving Wen Qing some time to get her emotions back in check.

“Thank you,” she said, her voice quiet and in control.

Wei Wuxian laughed it off, showing her the simple talisman for sending messages.

Wen Qing’s parting words were a stern reminder to be careful.

“Remember what I said about mixing Yin and Yang energy before you know what you’re doing. Your meridians are better this evening, but they are still inflamed. If you switch too quickly between cultivation forms, you can damage them permanently even if you manage to protect your core.”

Wei Wuxian took her words seriously, but couldn’t resist making light of it just to annoy her.

“Ah, Wen Qing! You care about me!”

Wen Qing shot him a glare and went out into the late evening, returning to Cloud Recesses before they noticed how long she’d been gone. Unlike the Lan, she would have no problem lying if questioned as to Wei Wuxian’s whereabouts.

The small cottage had only one bed, which Wen Ning insisted that A-Yuan and Wei Wuxian share.

“You’re still recovering,” Wen Ning said softly when Wei Wuxian objected.

“It wasn’t too long ago that you were bedridden, too,” Wei Wuxian replied.

“Xian-gege, Auntie Wen said you were going to put me to bed and we’d have a sleepover tonight.” A-Yuan clambered up on the bed with the blankets Wen Ning had laid out when they’d first arrived at the cabin. He snuggled under the covers, then patted the bed beside him. “Tell me a story?”

Wei Wuxian gave a side-eye to Wen Ning, who had an expression that was far too innocent to actually *be* innocent. But in the end, there was no refusing A-Yuan. Wei Wuxian sighed, a smile curving on his lips despite knowing he was being manipulated. He wondered if A-Yuan was able to get Lan Wangji to bend to his tiny will as well.

His money was on A-Yuan.

In the back of his mind, he tried not to worry that there had been no word from Lan Wangji. At least there had not been any soldiers, either. Hopefully morning would bring some news. Even bad news would be better than waiting. Wei Wuxian *hated* waiting.

He climbed into the lumpy bed with A-Yuan as Wen Ning spread a pallet out on the floor beside them. He told them stories of Yunmeng, some made up but most were true (if slightly embellished).

As he listened to the soft breathing of A-Yuan sleeping by his side later that night. He thought about what he’d wish for if he’d ever had any choice at all in the trajectory of his life. Living a quiet life, taking care of A-Yuan, having friends like Wen Ning and Wen Qing that he could trust. Lan Wangji… well. Even in his wishes, Wei Wuxian knew there would be limits to what he could have. He would be happy with a simple life.

If he could choose, he would choose that.

He knew better than to try to hold onto the moment for very long, but for the night, at least, he felt at peace.

The morning did not bring news from Lan Wangji, but it did bring Wen Qing.

She did not bring good news.

Wei Wuxian had woken early despite his exhaustion. Whether it was his apprehension about not having heard from Lan Wangji the previous night or simply their proximity to Cloud Recesses and its ridiculously early morning routine bleeding into his brain through osmosis, Wei Wuxian had woken at dawn. Wen Ning and A-Yuan were still sleeping, so Wei Wuxian had silently slipped out to bathe in the spring behind the cabin. He changed into his new, thinner robes, ignoring the ridiculous pang of having to leave the ones Lan Wangji had given him behind.

He returned to the cabin to find Wen Ning awake and cooking breakfast. (Wei Wuxian had cooked *once* when visiting Wen Ning back in their old village, and had not been allowed to touch any cooking related items since.)

Wen Qing had arrived before they had finished eating, her face set in lines that said she was not bringing good news.

“You need to leave,” she stated without preamble, walking into the small cabin where Wen Ning had cooked them congee. Wei Wuxian could tell she had more to say, and he didn’t want A-Yuan to be frightened if she had news of the specific punishment that the Lan elders had decided on for him.

“A-Yuan, why don’t you see if you can find some chili oil for me in one of the cupboards while I talk to your auntie, ok?” Wei Wuxian asked the child.

A-Yuan gave him a very serious look for a five-year-old. “Pretty-gege won’t leave without saying goodbye?”

Wei Wuxian hugged him tightly. “Never. This gege will always say goodbye first.”

A-Yuan considered Wei Wuxian for a moment, then nodded. “Pretty-gege will say goodbye to Rich-gege, too, so he isn’t sad?”

Wei Wuxian felt his stomach clench. “I can send Rich-gege a message. He is busy today, so I don’t think I’ll be able to say goodbye in person. But it’s ok. We talked about it when we got here.”

“Ok,” A-Yuan replied, turning and humming happily while he looked for the chili oil that Wei Wuxian was absolutely certain he would not find.

Wei Wuxian stepped outside the small cabin with Wen Qing. The sky was clear but hazy, indicating the day was likely to be quite warm.

“I’m guessing that the news isn’t good.”

“No,” Wen Qing confirmed. “When I arrived last night the meeting was just ending. Lan Qiren and the other elders seemed to be locked in an endless repetition of the sect rules, and every past account of anyone attempting to harness resentful energy. Hanguang-Jun pointed out that the circumstances of the past had involved choice, whereas you didn’t have that, but…,” she trailed off with an elegant gesture. “They could not reach an agreement, so they agreed to reconvene this morning, which they did at just around sunrise.”

Usually, early mornings were meant for meditation and reflection. The fact that they adjusted their very rigid routine meant they felt the matter was urgent.

“I take it that the tone of this morning’s meeting has changed,” Wei Wuxian said, already resigned to what he was about to hear.

“Lan Qiren and the other elders clearly did some thinking over night, and came to a conclusion. They are demanding that Lan Wangji bring you back to Cloud Recesses to be questioned.”

Wei Wuxian frowned. “Lan Wangji must have told them everything already. He’s not the kind of guy who would forget something important. Lan Qiren constantly reminded us all of how

superior Lan Wangji was compared to the rest of us mere mortals to keep track of all the details and remember every bit of minutia."

"Exactly," Wen Qing replied. "It's a clear excuse to get you under their control. Wei Wuxian, the punishments that they had been citing about past cultivators who broke serious sect rules were… extreme."

Wei Wuxian knew this. He had *told Lan Zhan* this already. But Wen Qing's words still sat like stones in his stomach.

"What did they say?"

"There was a lot of back and forth quoting rules at each other. Hanguan-Jun kept reciting: 'Do not make assumptions.' 'Be just.' 'Protect the weak.' 'Do not hold grudges.'"

Wei Wuxian's smile twisted. "And let me guess. The elders came back with things like: 'Avoid the crooked path.' 'Do not befriend the devil.'"

Wen Qing nodded. "That last one really set Hanguang-Jun off. He almost raised his voice. He said 'Wei Ying is not the devil,' and left the meeting. Zewu-Jun followed him, and is trying to get him to return. But the elders have made up their minds. They are going to issue and edict condemning you for use of demonic cultivation."

Wei Wuxian let out a breath. He had known it. Expected it.

"Thank you. You should return before they notice you've gone."

Wen Qing glanced over towards the cabin. "I will tell them I want to find A-Yuan and my brother."

There was not much more to be said. Wei Wuxian gathered his few personal things, leaving the robes Lan Wangji had given him behind. It had been nice, for a while, to have a place to go where there were people who cared about him.

But - as usual - it didn't last.

He hugged A-Yuan, promising to send him messages of all the cool places he was going to go and all the scary monsters he was going to put down so A-Yuan would not have to worry about playing.

As he headed towards the cabin door, he looked back to see Wen Qing looking at the robes he'd left behind, a strange - almost shocked - expression on her face. Wei Wuxian didn't know why she would be so surprised to see him leave the worn-out robes behind, nor at their state of disrepair, given that she knew where he'd been the last few months.

But there was no time to dwell on it. The sect leaders had made up their minds and were now simply trying to get Lan Wangji to agree. Either he would eventually concede and try to talk Wei Wuxian into coming back (which wasn't going to happen) or they would get tired of trying to change Lan Wangji's mind and come for Wei Wuxian on their own (and possibly punish Lan Wangji for not obeying their wishes).

He wished he could send a message to Lan Wangji and tell him not to worry about him and just to look out for his own self. But given that Lan Wangji was likely sitting in a room full of people who were calling for his blood, sending him a butterfly would not help him stay out of trouble with his uncle. Wei Wuxian only hoped that Lan Wangji wouldn't be punished for having tried to argue the case for him, though Wei Wuxian's experience with the Lan sect was that it valued obedience far above being correct or finding the truth.

He should never have come to Caiyi Town with Lan Zhan. Why could he never learn not to reach for things that were not meant to be his?

Wei Wuxian drew *Suibian*. He might not be a part of a sect, but he still knew whose side he was on.

It was time for him to go to war.

Wei Wuxian flew low, below the tree line, weaving in and out for hours to avoid detection. Since Jiang Cheng had already gone to Lotus Pier, they would already be preparing for the attack. Wei Wuxian's best way to help would be to pick off as many smaller encampments as he could before they could merge into an unstoppable army.

He had memorized the maps that they'd found with Wen Chao, but it was possible that the troops had moved since the maps were drawn up. He flew in the general direction of where he remembered the nearest encampment to Gusu to be. He was surprised when he came upon a camp much sooner than expected. Was the army already moving? Were they also going to target Cloud Recesses again?

He landed softly, glad he had still been flying low. It was mid day, and there would have been almost no chance a scout wouldn't have seen him coming if he'd been flying at standard height. He saw a pennant flying near the gate to the encampment, and his concern clicked up a notch. This was not one of the insignias that he remembered from Wen Chao's map. Wei Wuxian had a shit memory for conversation and events, but he had an artist's eye for details like insignias, or talisman characters and placement.

Something was not right.

Wei Wuxian brushed his forefinger along his nose, running through options and scenarios. He needed more information. He needed to actually talk to someone inside the camp and find out what the fuck was going on.

Wei Wuxian was suddenly glad for his more ordinary robes. This was a mercenary camp, so they were likely used to lower level cultivators from smaller sects or those without a sect at all showing up and looking for work. He slipped *Chenqing* into the folds of his robes, just in case the survivors of Wen Chao's camp had already spread the word about him, and he pasted on a confident grin and walked up to the sentry who was guarding the gate at the camp.

Several hours later, Wei Wuxian left the ruins of the camp behind him. It had been a relatively small group of mercenaries, so he had been able to take it out using the new chain lightning array he'd developed in combination with a disorientation array that had kept the mercenaries from being able to escape.

It would have been much faster to take care of if he'd been able to use resentful energy, but he knew that he would need to be able to ride *Suibian* as soon as he'd finished off the camp. It was lucky that the mercenaries had not been particularly high level, many of them not even cultivators at all His best guess was that Wen Ruohan was going with the 'quantity over quality' strategy, and would use the mercenaries as a meat shield to protect the actual cultivators.

He wondered if the mercenaries knew that their end game would not be to go home with their silver ingots at the end of it all.

The fact that a sect leader had no regard for the people he was paying to fight his war for him was neither new nor surprising. What *had* been surprising was that - when Wei Wuxian had asked the captain of the guard about how to sign up to be a part of Wen Chao's army - he'd been informed that this was one of Wen Xu's divisions. Not Wen Chao's.

Wen Xu had his own divisions, and they are not the ones that Wen Chao had on his map.

Which meant that Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng only knew about half the army that is coming for them.

"Fuck," Wei Wuxian said, dusting off his robes and mounting *Suibian.* He sent a butterfly to Lan Wangji. It didn't matter now if Lan Qiren and his whole set of elder groupies saw the note. Lan Wangji needed to know that the size of the army was way too large to be only heading for Lotus Pier.

Wen Xu has his own forces. Army is double.

The communication talisman was great for simple messages, but not for sending detailed maps or lengthy explanations. But if Lan Wangji had been able to figure out his cryptic 3-word message from before, this would be simple.

He had used up a lot of his energy in the lightning array (he made a mental note that he needed to figure out how to dial it back a bit at some point), but he still had enough juice to fly. The sun was setting, and the cookfires would be lit within the hour. Wei Wuxian flew below the tree line further towards QishanWen territory, waiting for the sky to darken enough that his silhouette would not be seen against it.

As soon as twilight arrived, he flew higher and higher, feeling the air grow cold and thin around him.

He had traveled the countryside enough as a rogue cultivator that he knew where all the permanent settlements were. He shivered in the icy, high altitude wind as he looked down at the landscape below.

Slowly, campfire after campfire began to light up, dotting the countryside. There were dozens of them, and from the height he was he could see a clear pattern of two lines of attack, one beginning to encircle the Unclean Realm and one nearly completely encircling Lotus Pier. The attack on Lotus Pier was imminent, with the troops already in position.

Mentally, Wei Wuxian overlaid the map he had in his mind with what he was seeing far below him. He tallied up the camps. It looked like Wen Ruohan trusted Wen Xu more, because Wen Chao had less than half the troops under his command.

Having gathered all the information he could, Wei Wuxian crouched low on *Suibian* and dove down as fast as he could in the direction of Lotus Pier. He had been starting to get light headed from the thin atmosphere so high up but there was no time to catch his breath. He needed to get to Jiang Cheng and let him know the layout of the troops that had Lotus Pier almost surrounded. And then he needed to go to Unclean Realm and let Nie Huaisang and his brother know as well.

He wished he could send a butterfly to Jiang Cheng and ask him to meet him outside the town, but - at the rate he was traveling - the butterfly would arrive significantly after he did. He hoped Madam Yu would forgive his violation of setting foot on Yunmeng territory to warn, but he didn't count on it.

He just hoped he could find Jiang Cheng or Jiang Fengmian before Madam Yu found him.

To be continued...

A/N - ok so the next chapter clearly will be about Lotus Pier and I have taken into account all of the interesting commentary on Madam Yu so... this will be fun. :-)

And as I have also started fleshing out the part of my story outline that dealt with the Nie sect, I want to get your thoughts on Meng Yao. In canon, when do you think he turned past the point of being redeemable? The first time I read it I thought it was later in the story but then after thinking about it and reading it again I am... less sure. Thoughts/comments/opinions?

Chapter 17: The cost of pride

A/N: Happy New Year!!! I am so glad that 2020 is over. We made it through a hell of a year, so - regardless of where we all landed - it's something to be proud of. Here's hoping that 2021 is less of a dumpster fire!! I'm not even aiming for good. I'd settle for boring.

This chapter was so painful to write because it went more in depth on wwx and madam yu and just... ugh. But we are getting closer to the part of the story where I have more things written, so will hopefully the pace of getting the chapters out will pick up soon?

Sorry!! I was pasting this chapter in parts as I proofread it and I missed some sentences. I think readers caught the 2 sections that were missed but if you see others, let me know!!

Wei Wuxan made it to Lotus Pier in under three hours. It is strange how it felt simultaneously like going home and invading enemy territory. He supposed that it is a bit of both, all things considered. But it messed with his head.

He was going to his childhood home, but there would be no welcome found there.

It was ironic, in a way. When he was younger, it had taken him so long to view Lotus Pier as his home, to trust that he would really be allowed to stay, to eat, to belong to the sect, if not fully the family.

It took him much less time to adapting to having no home again. It had always been a bit of a force fit to feel like he belonged with the Jiangs. Madam Yu had made sure he knew that his presence was not a welcome one, and he saw it every day in the frustration of Jiang Cheng.

No matter that Lotus Pier was no longer his home, he still knew his way around the surrounding land and the town outside the gates. The sentries were at their watch, and Wei Wuxian knew he would not be able to enter Lotus Pier itself without Madam Yu being notified immediately, regardless of the late hour. He considered getting a room at one of the inns in town, but he knew he would likely not be staying long. The townspeople had always liked him, no matter what Madam Yu had said to them. They wouldn’t report him if they saw him, but he didn’t want them to get in trouble when it eventually came out that he’d been there.

Even if he managed to get to Jiang Cheng before Madam Yu found out, it wouldn’t be long before someone notified her. Everyone knew who held the real power in Lotus Pier.

Jiang Fengmian might be the sect leader, but Madam Yu was the one everyone obeyed. The only exception to that had been when Jiang Fengmian had gone against her wishes in allowing Wei Wuxian to grow up in Lotus Pier, but the man had not crossed her since.

On the outskirts of town, not in direct line of sight of any of the watch posts for Lotus Pier, Wei Wuxian sent a butterfly to Jiang Cheng. It was late, but the Jiangs did not have the early bedime of the Lans, and most would still be up. He had invented the talisman after he left Lotus Pier, so there was a chance that it would not draw the attention of Madam Yu. He told Jiang Cheng where to meet him and that he had new intel on the enemy positions.

He waited in the shadows of the jungle, staying away from the glow of the lanterns that were still burning in town. The moon was nearly full, and it spilled a silvery light that made the leaves of the tress and the grass look more blue than green. He breathed in the scent of the lotus blossoms from a pond nearby. It was a scent he'd grown up with, and he never realized how much he would miss it until it was gone. He might not have had a perfect time growing up in Lotus Pier, but the scent would always remind him of the home that had taken him in as a desperate child when he had nowhere else to go.

Whatever flaws Madam Yu and Uncle Fengmian had, Wei Wuxian would always owe them for that. It was - in part - why he was here, even though he knew there was a good chance he would be caught.

They had saved him. He would return the favor if he could.

While he waited, he pulled out a piece of talisman paper and began marketing the positions of the troops he'd seen that were part of the encirclement of Lotus Pier. He wished he had proper parchment, but a large talisman paper was the best he could have. He had a feeling he wouldn't be allowed to stay here long enough to make a proper map, but this would give Jiang Cheng at least something to work with. Wei Wuxian could write small when he needed to.

He sketched quickly, his artist's eye for detail making it easy to recall scale and position of the armies. He finished the map just as he heard Jiang Cheng's familiar footsteps approaching.

"There better be a fucking good reason why you're here," Jiang Cheng bit out. "You know Mother has the guards notify her of any activity at the gates."

Wei Wuxian rolled his eyes. "Good to see you, too, Jiang Cheng."

Jiang Cheng scoffed. "Well?" he prompted, clearly having no patience at being woken up in the middle of the night with a summons to go see Wei Wuxian. When they were younger and still brothers and clanmates, Wei Wuxian would have jostled Jiang Cheng and forced some affection on him. But Wei Wuxian knew that trying to repair his relationship with Jiang Cheng would only cause trouble for the sect heir. Not just with Madam Yu, but now also the Wen and the Lan sects. So, instead of teasing or trying to get a rise out of him, Wei Wuxian simply answered his question.

"Wen Xu has his own army. In addition to what we saw in Wen Chao's papers. And it's bigger." Wei Wuxian handed Jiang Cheng the map that he'd sketched, detailing what he'd seen of the Wen encampments.

Jiang Cheng didn't respond for a moment, simply looking at Wei Wuxian, then at the map of the enemy forces. Wei Wuxian knew the implications of his words didn't need to be spelled out. Just because everyone always called Wei Wuxian a genius did not mean that Jiang Cheng was dumb. It would have been a stretch for them to defeat just Wen Chao's army. More than doubling the size of the attacking force took the odds of winning down to almost zero.

"The Nie sect…," Jiang Cheng began, but Wei Wuxian cut him off before he could put voice to the hope of reinforcements.

“Is also being surrounded. They wouldn’t dare leave Unclean Realm, but even if they did, they wouldn’t make it here in time with all the troops between you and them.”

Jiang Cheng ran a hand over his face. “Fuck. How much time do we have?”

“The troops are already in position. All they need to do is tighten the noose. It wouldn’t make sense for them to wait more than a few days to attack.”

“So it’s true. You’ve returned despite the banishment.” Madam Yu appeared on the path from the village, walking towards them, her two guards trailing behind her.

She turned to her guards. “Seize him! He knows the punishment for setting foot on YunmengJiang lands without permission. Unless you have been invited here without my knowledge?”

Zidian crackled at her wrist as she glared first at Wei Wuxian then at Jiang Cheng. It had been three years since Wei Wuxian had felt its bite, and he was not looking forward to reliving the experience.

“Mother -,” Jiang Cheng began, but Madam Yu cut him off.

“Be quiet. Let him speak for himself,” Madam Yu snapped. “He’s always had plenty of words to throw around. He doesn’t need yours.”

Jiang Cheng looked at her at Wei Wuxian a moment, then dropped his gaze, his brows furrowed and his lips tight. He might not agree with his mother, but he would never disobey her.

It was as it had always been.

Wei Wuxian turned to face Madam Yu, stepping slightly away from Jiang Cheng to draw her attention away from the person he would always think of as his little brother, even when it was unwelcome. When he met her gaze, could see the same fury in her eyes that he had seen every day growing up.

Madam Yu had not been able to prevent her husband from letting Wei Wuxian live in Lotus Pier and train alongside her son, but she had never forgiven either of them for doing so. Wei Wuxian was a constant reminder that her husband had loved another, and that Madam Yu’s son could not live up to that woman’s child - both in the eyes of Jiang Fengmian and the eyes of the cultivation world.

She hated Wei Wuxian for being Cangse Sanren’s son. For being a stronger cultivator than Jiang Cheng. For being the one Jiang Fengmian bonded with the most.

She hated Wei Wuxian for existing and nothing Wei Wuxian had done or would ever do would change that.

One look at her eyes was all it took to bring back the crashing flood of the constant anxiety he’d felt as a child that he’d be tossed out of Lotus Pier, unwanted and homeless again. It had finally happened, but at least he’d been old enough to fend for himself physically. It didn’t erase the knowledge that he had no home, and no family. His parents had loved him unconditionally, but they had died. While the Jiangs had taken him in, his presence had been a splinter in the family,

slowly breaking them apart. As much as he had desperately wanted to belong, and be a real son to Jiang Fengmian and Madam Yu, he never would. Jiang Cheng would always resent him for being stronger and smarter. Shijie loved him, and suffered the derision of Madam Yu and others for it.

Disappointment settled in his gut and he realized that, foolishly, idiotically, he had hoped that warning Lotus Pier might make a difference in how Madam Yu saw him. Never as a son, but maybe as something less hateful than looking at him and only ever seeing the woman that Jiang Fengmian had preferred over her.

Poor little Wei Ying. Always so desperate for love and attention, but no one wants to keep you, a voice in his head murmured. *Why do you keep trying? They don't deserve you.*

Wei Wuxian could feel a foreign flare of anger and resentment swirl through him, as though he was sensing someone else's emotions but it was inside his own head. It startled him with its unfamiliarity, and he pushed it down and focused on answering Madam Yu's question.

"No. I was not invited. But I bring news of new Wen troops that are converging on Lotus Pier. I felt that the safety of Lotus Pier was more important."

"It's true, Mother," Jiang Cheng began as Madam Yu's personal guards stepped up and each took one of Wei Wuxian's arms, forcing Wei Wuxian to kneel.

Wei Wuxian could have fought them off, but he'd known the risks in coming to Lotus Pier. If he fought back, he would not have the chance to give Jiang Cheng any of the other information he had about the troop locations.

"Be quiet, A-Cheng," she snapped. "You're supposed to be sect leader someday. You need to learn that rules need to be obeyed even if someone you like is the one who breaks them. You spent your childhood making excuses for Wei Wuxian. It's time for you to grow up and be a man who stands by his sect. He claims the information he has is worth the price. Let's see if he still feels the same after he's paid it."

Jiang Cheng looked at Wei Wuxian, the expression on his face a mirror of the one he always had as a child when Wei Wuxian would be punished, usually for things they had both done. Wei Wuxian gave him a small smile. It would be fine. Madam Yu wasn't going to kill him. She was just going to remind him who was in charge. In the end, she was right. It was worth a few lashes if it meant he could help save Lotus Pier.

"You think this is funny?" Madam Yu asked sharply.

"No, Madam Yu. This one knew he would be punished," Wei Wuxian said calmly. It only seemed to make her more angry.

"And as usual, you don't think about the consequences of your actions," she said to him, scathingly. "Prepare him," Madam Yu said to her guards, her voice hard and controlled.

One of Madam Yu's guards to shove his head down while the other pulled his robes open to bare his back. It was actually more than a small mercy. Being whipped with the fabric on left fibres from the garment embedded in the wounds, which made healing slower and more painful, and

more likely to scar. With his degree of spiritual power, he scarred very little, but it wasn't as though it was fun.

"Do you have anything to say for yourself?" she asked, standing directly in front of where he knelt.

"No, Madam," Wei Wuxian said, looking down at her feet and mentally preparing himself for what was about to come. He'd learned in the past that it didn't matter what he said. The more he talked, the angrier she became and the worse the punishment would be.

"Very well," she replied. Her guards stepped back. They might believe that Wei Wuxian deserved to be banished, but they still respected him enough to know that they didn't need to hold him down like a child to face his punishment.

By the way her feet shifted slightly, he could tell she'd raised her arm for the first strike. He could hear Zidian crackle. Wei Wuxian closed his eyes and braced for the hit, but did nothing to evade it. He'd known what the penalty for violating the terms of the banishment were. He heard Zidian sing, then the sound of it striking something.

Except... it hadn't struck *him* .

He opened his eyes in confusion only to find *Bichen* held in front of him, Zidian wrapped around it's blade. Madam Yu was nearly incandescent with anger as she stared at the flowing white robes and pristine yet unyielding form of Lan Wangji.

"Second Master Lan, how dare you interfere with Jiang sect matters!" Madam Yu said, her voice filled with fury.

"Wei Ying is no longer a member of the Jiang sect," Lan Wangji said, his eyes locked on Madam Yu. "He came on a mission from GusuLan."

Wei Wuxian was grateful that no one was wasting their time looking at *him* because had Lan Wangji just *lied?* Wei Wuxian replayed the man's words and realized that - while Lan Wangji did not use words often - he was a fucking *genius* at telling the absolute truth in a way that could be interpreted as a lie. Wei Wuxian had come to Lotus Pier on a mission, absolutely true. He had come here from GusuLan territory, also absolutely true.

In his realization of the hidden, devious depths of Lan Wangji's mind, he realized he had missed some of the conversation.

"- would not be pleased to learn that a diplomatic emissary would be subjected to such treatment," Lan Wangji stated, his voice cold and hard.

"Then GusuLan should take more care in considering who it sends to deliver its messages!" Madam Yu retorted, but she had withdrawn Zidian and was not attempting a second strike.

"Is Madam Yu directing GusuLan on how to conduct sect matters?" Lan Wangji asked, his voice calm in a way that immediately spelled danger to anyone who had ears.

“It is an insult to YunmengJiang to have this one sent to our territories,” Madam Yu replied. It was not quite a back-pedal, but it was also not an attack.

“Lotus Pier is under imminent threat of attack. GusuLan is nearly cut off from YunmengJiang by Wen armies, and Wei Ying has intimate knowledge both of the terrain and the enemy. But if Madam Yu prefers not to receive warnings or information in the future from Gusu unless she personally approves of the messenger, then I will ensure that Brother is aware of her preference and that she speaks for the YunmengJiang sect.”

Lan Wangji’s response was brilliant. It was both a threat of withdrawal of support as well as a reminder that he is the brother (and current heir) of the GusuLan sect all wrapped up in a silken web of polite accommodation.

Wei Wuxian was so busy admiring the skill of what Lan Wangji had just pulled off that he almost missed the fact that the last part of Lan Wangji’s statement was leveled first at Jiang Cheng, who bristled, and then over Madam Yu’s shoulder, where Jiang Fengmian could be seen to be approaching with Jiang Yanli following behind him along with a dozen guards.

Wei Wuxian wondered if somehow he’d been whipped unconscious and this was a fever dream, because he never could have imagined someone dressing Madam Yu down that way practically on the doorstep of her own sect headquarters. Based on the shocked and furious expression on her face, Madam Yu was feeling much the same.

“Hanguang-Jun,” Jiang Fengmian bowed to Lan Wangji, Jiang Yanli bowing also. Jiang Fengmian’s face was wary as he took in the scene in front of him: Wei Wuxian kneeling on the ground, his torso bared, with Lan Wangji standing protectively in front of him between Madam Yu, her guards, and Jiang Cheng. It was not a scene that boded well for inter-sect relations.

Lan Wangji lowered *Bichen* , but did not re-sheath it as he bowed in return. “Sect Leader Jiang. Jiang guniang.”

Jiang YanLi’s soft eyes were wide and fixed only on Wei Wuxian like she thought he might disappear.

“A-Xian!” she cried out softly, stepping towards him before Madam Yu held out an arm to block her.

“A-Li. Act like the lady you are supposed to be and not the embarrassment that you are,” Madam Yu said scathingly. “He is no longer your martial brother. Greeting him like this is unseemly. You’ve already had Jin Zixuan reject you once. Can’t you at least *try* to live up to your station while we’re renegotiating the engagement? Or are you happy to let that one break it a second time for you.”

Jiang Yanli’s eyes filled with tears, but she did not attempt to approach Wei Wuxian again. It killed Wei Wuxian to not be able to go to her after so much time apart. Of all the things he’d missed since his exile, Shijie had been the most painful.

In many ways, Jiang Yanli had been more like a mother to him than a sister. She had been his only source of comfort while growing up, the person he ran to when he had nightmares or heard a dog bark or felt like everything he did was wrong.

“Shijie,” he greeted, softly. All he could do was look at her, and hope she understood how he felt. A tear spilled over her lower lashes and ran down her cheek, but her lips curved into a small, tremulous smile.

Something in Wei Wuxian’s chest unclenched. Whatever she had been told about his banishment, about her broken engagement, or about his ‘evil ways’, she did not hate him.

He could bear whatever Madam Yu did to him, as long as Shijie didn’t hate him.

Jiang Fengmian looked down to where Wei Wuxian was still kneeling. “What is happening, A-Xian?”

“Sect Leader Jiang.” Wei Wuxian greeted him formally, lowering his head as he was not able to bow from his current position. He knew better than to refer to him as ‘Uncle’ anymore. He saw the older man’s lips tighten at the formal address, but they both knew why it was necessary. “This one apologizes for disobeying the terms of the banishment.”

If Wei Wuxian had been foolish enough hope that Jiang Fengmian would lift the banishment due to Wei Wuxian’s role in warning Lotus Pier for a second time, he would have been disappointed. Luckily, he had had no such expectations after a lifetime of watching the conflict avoidant Sect Leader of YunmengJiang let his wife do as she pleased, as though he were serving eternal penance for not returning her affections.

Wei Wuxian simply absorbed the uncomfortable glace that Jiang Fengmian sent Madam Yu as he wanted for the man to respond.

“We were grateful for your warning about their plan with the *Xiangliu* ,” Jiang Fengmian said, though he did not address the banishment. “Why don’t you stand up and we can discuss the situation.”

Madam Yu snorted derisively, Zidian sparking again, and Lan Wangji instantly raised *Bichen* to block a potential strike to Wei Wuxian.

“ *You* ,” Madam Yu sneered at her husband, clearly finding him an easier target for her verbal attacks than Lan Wangji had proved to be. “You might still favor this one,” she said, gesturing dismissively at Wei Wuxian. “But even you can’t go against your own sect’s rules. You agreed to the terms of his banishment when he brought shame upon our sect and jeopardized our relationships with both the Jin and the Lan sects. You are the sect leader, aren’t you? Are you so weak that you cannot see your own rules carried out?”

Jiang Fengmian looked only briefly at Madam Yu, then turned his gaze on Lan Wangji. “From what I heard, Hanguang-Jun said that A-Ying was here as a messenger from Gusu. If he is carrying wartime information to help protect Lotus Pier, it doesn’t seem like it is a true violation. There are exceptions, if a person is invited or sent on urgent sect matters.”

Wei Wuxian looked at Lan Wangji, but his face remained hard and expressionless. The elders of Gusu had been in the process of declaring Wei Wuxian an enemy of their sect, as far as Wei Wuxian had understood. They would be appalled at the notion that Wei Wuxian was here representing them in any capacity whatsoever.

What if Madam Yu wrote to Lan Qiren to complain about them using Wei Wuxian as a messenger? Lan Wangji would be punished harshly. But if Wei Wuxian corrected their interpretation of Lan Wangji's words now, it would make Lan Wangji out to be a liar, which could also get back to Cloud Recesses.

Wei Wuxian blew out a breath. As much as he appreciated Lan Wangji coming and defending him, he wish the man hadn't. He didn't want to be the cause of a rift between Lan Wangji and his home. One exiled cultivator between the two of them was sufficient.

"Wei Ying. Can you stand?" Lan Wangji asked, ignoring both Jiang Fengmian and Madam Yu.

"Yeah. I'm fine, Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian replied. Lan Wangji still looked as though he were going to put *Bichen* to use at any moment.

Wei Wuxian did not understand why Lan Wangji would be almost *vibrating* with anger when the Lan elders would probably be agreeing with every single thing Madam Yu was saying. But he stood, pulling his robes back on as he faced his former sect leader. He could feel Lan Wangji's presence at his side, solid and implacable. Wei Wuxian knew he shouldn't get used to it, but he was incredibly grateful in that moment that Lan Wangji had decided to follow him, whatever his reason might be.

Wei Wuxian had come to Lotus Pier to warn them about war with the Wen; he hoped he didn't end up causing war with the Lan.

"What news do you bring?" Jiang Fengmian asked once Wei Wuxian had covered himself.

"Wen Xu has his own set of troops. The total Wen force is more than double what we thought when we first discovered the army," Wei Wuxian began.

Jiang Cheng pulled out the sketch of the forces, carefully walking around his mother to show it to his father. "Wei Wuxian scouted the encampments before coming here. They have already positioned them to cut us off from any allies."

Wei Wuxian noted how Jiang Fengmian actually looked at Jiang Cheng when he spoke, and how Jiang Cheng seemed to have a bit more confidence in front of him than he had in the past. It brought back Madam Yu's words from the past about how Wei Wuxian had only ever been a burden to Jiang Fengmian and an obstacle for Jiang Cheng.

She had not been wrong.

"And why should we take his word about this?" Madam Yu's sharp voice rang cut off the conversation as she approached with her guards. "That one, who has never done anything but cause trouble for the YunmengJiang Sect, a *subordinate* who is unable to obey even a simple order to stay off our lands. Who is he to be telling the Jiang sect what allies we may seek?"

"I'm not telling you what to do. I'm telling you where the enemy forces are." Wei Wuxian was aware that his tone was not as subservient as he had been in the past, and Madam Yu's narrowed eyes indicated she had heard it as well.

“What you say makes no sense. Armies take money,” Madam Yu scoffed. “The Wen had already stretched themselves thin with the army they raised in the botched attack on Cloud Recesses. Soldiers can’t be fabricated out of thin air.”

A flicker of an idea flashed through Wei Wuxian’s mind, as the spiderweb of whispers in his head fluttered at her words, but he pushed it aside for the moment. “They are mostly mercenaries. And they’re being funded by the Jin Sect.”

“Oh? And do you have evidence of this?” As usual, it was Madam Yu who asked all the questions. Jiang Fengmian did not look happy, but he did not interrupt.

“Wen Chao told me that his father planned to attack three of the major sects. Not four. The Lan and Jiang were targeted by the *Xiangliu,* which left only the Nie and Jin sects. Only one of those had enough gold to fund the mercenaries.”

“So you’re just guessing, with no actual evidence. And we’re supposed to take your word against one of the major sects? A sect that I *personally* have close ties with. Do you think I am stupid? That I would not know if they were planning to go to war against us? Why would the Jin take up arms against Lotus Pier? We’re in the process of solidifying an alliance through A-Li’s marriage.”

“Lotus Pier can choose to act on the information, or it can not,” Lan Wangji stated coldly, his voice conveying that he was done with this conversation.

Madam Yu either didn’t hear the warning tone, or chose to ignore it.

“Furthermore, all of this so-called evidence about the Jin and the Wen army came from you supposedly taking out Wen Chao’s garrison on your own. Wasn’t Jiang Cheng there with you? Was he so useless you don't even mention him? Even you, in all your arrogance, can’t honestly believe you can take out an entire garrison of trained cultivators on your own.”

Jiang Cheng looked up, and opened his mouth to speak, but a sharp look from his mother cut him off.

The whispering in Wei Wuxian’s head grew louder. Angrier.

“I was also there,” Lan Wangji said. “Wei Ying’s skills do not decrease just because others are unable to see them properly.”

Wei Wuxian smiled, and he saw her eyes widen slightly at the coldness of it.

“It has been some years since you’ve seen me fight, Madam Yu. Don't assume you know my strength. But Jiang Cheng knows what happened. I am surprised he did not tell you.”

“Of course he told me! He always was trailing around acting as your sidekick rather than the sect heir he is supposed to be. Then moping when his father wants nothing to do with him. But I’ve seen enough cultivators to know that you are not that far ahead of everyone else. You just talk louder about it.”

“Enough,” Lan Wangji said. “We have completed our task.”

“Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian sighed. “We can’t just leave them. The Wen attack could come in the next few days.”

“Lotus Pier does not need your help,” Madam Yu spat. “You have delivered your message like a good servant, but we are more than capable of defending Lotus Pier without you.”

“Mother, the Wen army -,” Jiang cheng began, but Madam Yu cut him off.

“Is not as large as Wei Wuxian claims. We can send our own scouts out to verify. Your assistance is no longer required,” Madam Yu said, dismissively.

Wei Wuxian just looked at her, shocked, for a moment. Surely she wouldn’t put all of Lotus Pier at risk just because she hated him. There were civilians. Children. They would all die if the Wen attacked. He looked over to where Jiang Fengmian was staring down at the map Wei Wuxian had drawn, his face grim.

“Sect leader. We can help with evacuation of -,” Wei Wuxian began, but Madam Yu cut him off.

“The Jiang Sect will not cower in fear of Qishan. If the Wen forces are as large as you say, shouldn’t you be on your way to warn the QinghеNie? Or were other, less controversial messengers chosen for that duty.”

Lan Wangji looked at Jiang Fengmian, giving him the opportunity to speak as Sect Leader. But the older only appeared resigned to his fate. Jiang Cheng was frozen, his eyes wide in horror as he realized his father was not going to gainsay his mother, even if it meant the safety of the sect.

“If the YungmengJiang sect does not wish our aid, then we will leave.” Lan Wangji turned, his eyes locking on Wei Wuxian’s.

Wei Wuxian wanted to scream, he wanted to fight, he wanted to *make them let him help.*

“Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji said, his voice gentle. Wei Wuxian had definitely been picking up on how to read Lan Wangji’s intonation, because he was very clearly picking up on the message that just because YunmengJiang did not accept his help did not mean others won’t.

Wei Wuxian swallowed past the knot in his throat, then nodded. “Fine. *Fine.* Fuck!”

“A-Xian!” Jiang Yanli’s cry pulled his attention back to where the Jiangs stood. His eyes widened as he saw her shove her way through the two guards standing in front of her and ran towards him, ignoring her mother’s outraged call of her name. She threw herself at him, holding him tight and Wei Wuxian hugged her back.

“Thank you for trying. Please be careful. A-Cheng told me… about…,” she cut off, looking up at him through wet, worried eyes. “Are you ok?”

Emotion swamped Wei Wuxian. His sister was by far the weakest cultivator of his family, yet she was the only one with the spine to defy Madam Yu.

“Shijie, please. I am not wrong about the troops. I am not lying. *Do not stay here* ,” he murmured desperately into her ear so that her parents could not hear his words. “Take the children, warn the village. Hide in the jungle if you have nowhere else to go. I will find you, I

promise. I will come for you." He pulled two talisman papers from his sleeve and quickly nicked his thumb on the edge of *Bichen* and drew on them. He was surprised that Madam Yu hadn't set the soldiers on him yet, but perhaps she was satisfied with the fact that he was leaving and she had won. "Activate these and speak your message into them. One or two sentences is all they can carry. But they will find me and lead me back to you."

The exchange had evidently dragged on too long, and Madam Yu's guards were upon them. They dragged Jiang Yanli away but she met his gaze and nodded before she was taken back to Lotus Pier.

Wei Wuxian looked over to Jiang Cheng. "You know I'm right. If you send for me, I will come. Copy one of the talismans that I gave to *Shijie.* "

Jiang Cheng's lips were in a tight line, but he gave a nod, then followed his parents back to Lotus Pier.

Madam Yu's personal guards stayed back to ensure that Wei Wuxian left their territory.

They walked a short distance down the road leading away from Lotus Pier. They should be flying. There wasn't time for Wei Wuxian to be getting emotional. But all he could think about was how much he risked to come here and they *didn't listen* .

So many people he knew, people he cared about, were going to die and they would not let him help evacuate anyone. He prayed that Shijie would find a way to escape. Buildings could be rebuilt. Lotus Pier was not worth dying for. Leaving was the hardest thing he'd ever done. But Lan Wangji was right. There were other people that they needed to warn; people who might take their help in the war that was upon them.

"I am here, Wei Ying," Lan Zhan said quietly as he walked beside him.

Wei Wuxian turned to look at Lan Wangji, the man's golden eyes and pale skin glowing in the moonlight that shone down upon them.

"Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian's voice closed up briefly.

They mounted their swords and headed towards the Unclean Realms. There would be fall-out for Lan Wangji from this. It was unavoidable. And it would likely be serious. The wind picked up, rippling the trees below them as they flew. Wei Wuxian wasn't sure if Lan Wangji could hear him, but he needed to say the words anyway.

"I'm sorry. And thank you."

To be continued…

A/N - ok this chapter was so fucking depressing to write. Uggghhhh…. But now we get to go to the Nie sect and they don't hate wwx there, so the next chapter will not be as angst. I think this was probably the worst anst of the story, so we're rounding the corner here. Also I have discovered that I have a MAJOR kink for protective!LWJ. So we will need to find ways to see more of that.

I guess I would be interested to see if people think Jiang Fengmian or Jiang Cheng will stand up to Madam Yu or not, when push comes to shove? Obviously I know where this is going but... LOLOL.

Chapter 18: An alliance is formed

A/N - sorry this is so late. I was busy watching the government of my country implode and could not stop doomscrolling on Twitter. You'd think I'd be immune to this sort of shit after 2020 BUT NO IT JUST KEEPS COMING!!!!!

Anyway, I finally had enough mental capacity to proofread this chapter so I can post it. And I will respond to the comments I haven't gotten to next now that I've imposed a daily Twitter timelimit for myself. LOL.

As they flew to Unclean Realms, Wei Wuxian's thoughts were a jumbled mess of worry, frustration, fear, and about a hundred other things he couldn't put a name to. The frantic buzzing of 'what ifs' were pounding continuously through his brain. Every fibre of his being wanted to return to Lotus Pier and stay and fight, even if Madam Yu turned her soldiers against him. But letting the Nie sect be taken out just because he still felt like he owed the Jiangs wasn't right. He'd figure out a way to help both, but first he needed to be able to tell the Nie sect what he'd seen and offer his help to them as well. He could do more good fighting *with* a sect rather than *against* it.

He felt like shit that Madam Yu hadn't believed him (or - perhaps even worse - she *had* but hated him enough to refuse to take action, regardless), that Jiang Fengmian hadn't refuted anything she'd said, and that Jiang Cheng and Shijie were going to bear the consequences of all of that. Along with the rest of the Jiang Sect.

Wei Wuxian wondered if his Shijie would be able to get anyone out before the attack, or if Madam Yu would already have searched her and found the talismans. Jiang Yanli could do a lot more than most people gave her credit for, but she would still need help evacuating an entire town and a bunch of kids

Wei Wuxian *hated* that he would not be there to help her, at least not at first.

He almost turned back countless times, but in the end, he settled for sending one final message to his brother. Jiang Cheng might not be the best at standing up to his mother, but he loved his sect and was loyal to it. He hoped the message he sent wouldn't do more harm than good, but with Jiang Cheng, sometimes it was hard to tell.

Lan Wangji watched him send off the butterfly with an expression that Wei Wuxian couldn't fully read. He seemed angry, but Wei Wuxian had been careful to not slow down as he sent his message. He wasn't holding them back.

He supposed that Lan Wangji had a lot of reasons to be unhappy at the moment as well. Wei Wuxian was not the only one who would likely have serious fallout from the night's events. Guilt snaked through him. It was bad enough that Wei Wuxian had not been able to convince Madam Yu to accept his help in saving Lotus Pier, but he'd also likely gotten Lan Wangji in trouble with the Lan sect elders.

Wei Wuxian still was unclear whether Lan Wangji had even had permission to leave Cloud Recesses when he'd come looking for Wei Wuxian, but - even if he had - letting Madam Yu believe Wei Wuxian was on a mission sanctioned by the Lan was eventually going to get back to Lan Qiren.

Wei Wuxian had no idea what the punishment for something like that was, but given what the punishment for just fucking *slouching* was, it wasn't likely to be good.

Lan Wangji never got in trouble for anything, except for when Wei Wuxian pulled him down. It was no wonder that Lan Wangji looked angry. He had every right to be. But after facing Madam Yu, Wei Wuxian didn't think he was up to hearing another person tell him what a fuck-up he was. Of course, Lan Wangji wouldn't let that stop him from helping. He was too good of a person for that. That knowledge only made Wei Wuxian feel worse.

In a way, Wei Wuxian was grateful that they were flying full speed, and conversation would be difficult unless they shouted. Given that they were trying to keep their flight to the Unclean Realms undetected, they would have to wait until they arrived to speak.

Wei Wuxian gestured for them to land outside the city, to avoid detection. Lan Wangji gave him a slightly puzzled look, but followed.

Wei Wuxian dismounted *Suibian* , then turned to Lan Wangji. Despite flying for the past hour at top speed, not a single hair of the esteemed Second Jade was out of place. It always made Wei Wuxian feel like such a disaster by comparison.

"I can send a message to Nie Huaisang. He will be able to sneak us inside without anyone seeing us," Wei Wuxian said cautiously. He had been unprepared for Lan Wangji's appearance at Lotus Pier, but he would try to protect the man better in the Unclean Realms.

"Why? Are you not welcome in the Unclean Realms?" Lan Wangji seemed honestly puzzled.

Wei Wuxian blinked. "Me? No. I mean, I haven't been here much. Nie Mingue handles the night hunts around here, so there isn't much need for a rogue cultivator. I thought… I mean… where does your sect think you are right now?"

Lan Wangji took a moment to realize the implications. "You think I disobeyed my sect?"

Yes. Wei Wuxian kept silent and settled for a shrug. It was probably stupid that he thought that Lan Wangji would have come rushing over to find him if he didn't have permission. Wei Wuxian shouldn't have worried. Of *course* Lan Wangji wouldn't break the rules for Wei Wuxian. That would make no sense. Wei Wuxian felt both extremely relieved and somehow disappointed at the realization.

"What? I mean… No? Look, I just knew that your elders were still debating how to handle me, and I can't imagine that the conversation was going in my favor." Wei Wuxian decided that it was probably best not to mention that Wen Qing had been listening in on their council meeting. "And then all of a sudden you showed up at Lotus Pier, which - how did you even get there so fast, anyway?" A panicked thought suddenly struck him. "Wait, they didn't send you to bring me back to Cloud Recesses, did they?"

Lan Wangji's expression *definitely* looked annoyed at Wei Wuxian's last question, which was unfair, as it was a totally legitimate question to ask in the circumstances. Lan Wangji had made a hobby out of reporting Wei Wuxian and hauling him in for punishment when they were younger. The infractions he was accused of now were much more serious.

" *No.* Brother was trying to talk with Uncle and the other elders. It was not progressing. He sent me to scout the nearest Wen encampment. I was nearly there when I received your message about Wen Xu's army"

"And you just… knew I would head right to Lotus Pier?" Wei Wuxian asked, somewhat surprised that Lan Wangji would have bothered to figure out where Wei Wuxian was in the first place, much less known him well enough to do so correctly.

"Mm."

Wei Wuxian didn't know what to say to that, and was momentarily silent as he processed this information. The two men looked at each other for a moment, Wei Wuxian's face filled with surprise, and Lan Wangji's filled with patience.

Wei Wuxian was the first to look away. "Ok, so… you came to Lotus Pier to… to help them fight the Wen? You could have stayed there if that was what your sect wanted you to do, I mean… the Jiangs didn't want *my* help but I'm sure they would have accepted yours."

Lan Wangji's aura seemed to darken, though his expression didn't change at all. "I came for Wei Ying."

Wei Wuxian wasn't sure what to make of the cold as ice tone in Lan Wangji's voice, nor the way his golden eyes seemed to be almost glowing with a dangerous anger. If Lan Wangji hadn't just finished saying that he wasn't there to drag Wei Wuxian back for punishment, he would have thought that was what his expression was about. As it was, Wei Wuxian was just confused.

"But, are you ok? I didn't like… get you in trouble with all my shit?"

Lan Wangji's body, which was already rigid with anger, tensed further. He looked over towards Wei Wuxian, the fractional widening of his eyes practically screaming disbelief.

"I'm sorry! I know you must be really pissed at me for getting you in trouble, but I -," Wei Wuxian didn't get a chance to finish as Lan Wangji cut him off.

" *Wei Ying* . Do not apologize," Lan Wangji said sternly.

Wei Wuxian didn't know how to respond, so he deflected instead.

"Ah, Lan Zhan. Breaking so many rules tonight! Interrupting others, staying up past 9pm, telling half truths about me being on GusuLan business. You'll make me faint in shock if you keep this up."

"Not a half truth. Brother put me in charge of night hunts, including who accompanies me on missions. I was sent on a mission to find out about the Wen forces. Wei Ying has the best knowledge pertaining to that task."

And, ok, that was maybe a bit better of a back-story than what Wei Wuxian had been fearing. It would be hard to even say that Lan Wangji had told a half truth. Wei Wuxian felt a burden lift from him, that at least he hadn't managed to fuck up Lan Wangji's reputation in all of this.

At least, not yet.

"But, Lan Zhan, I…," Wei Wuxian cut himself off this time as Lan Wangji cast him a frustrated glance.

"Wei Ying. I am the one who should be asking if you are alright."

"Why? I mean, I didn't even get whipped." Wei Wuxian slid a finger along the collar of his outer robe, tugging the opening wider to show the unmarked skin of his shoulder. He ignored the way the cold wind brushed over his skin in the same way he ignored the vulnerability of it being laid bare against his will not long ago. "You stopped Madam Yu before she could. That was… ah, that was really badass, Lan Zhan! But I hope it doesn't get you in trouble."

Lan Wangji looked at him in silence for a moment. While there was no movement of his facial muscles, to call Lan Wangjis' face 'expressionless' would have been grossly inaccurate. Lan Wangji was *furious,* his golden eyes likely to light his enemies on fire if they crossed his path . "Would be worth it. Jiang Wanyin. Sect Leader Jiang. Did *nothing* ."

Wei Wuxian felt his lips curve into a humorless smile, as he breathed out a half laugh. "Jiang Fengmian is eternally in the dog house for bringing me to Lotus Pier in the first place. He saved my life when I was a kid. He doesn't owe me more than that. And what was Jiang Cheng supposed to do? Madam Yu is his mother, and she rules Lotus Pier with an iron fist. If even the sect leader won't go against her, what could Jiang Cheng do?"

"Stand up for Wei Ying! Wei Ying was First Disciple. Sect Leader Jiang owes his protection for those who owe him their loyalty." Lan Wangji's rage was not abating, and Wei Wuxian didn't know what to make of it.

"Lan Zhan. I mean… yeah, it would be great to not have Madam Yu hate me. But you have to understand. My presence in Lotus Pier undermined not just her position as Jiang Fengmian's wife, but also threatened Jiang Cheng's position as heir. Even though Jiang Fengmian never officially adopted me, he didn't treat me like the other disciples, either. You know the rumors about my parentage. It wouldn't be the first clan to fall to in-fighting between factions. Madam Yu wasn't *wrong* in telling me my presence at Lotus Pier was bad for the sect. They took me in when I was a child and saved my life. I'm able to defend myself now. They don't owe me anything. It's the other way around."

Lan Wangji did not look any less angry. If anything, he looked *more* angry. Wei Wuxian searched for a way to make Lan Wangji understand. It had seemed like Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng had developed - if not a friendship - then at least a mutual respect. He didn't want to see that destroyed because of him.

"Lan Zhan, I broke a serious sect rule by returning without permission. As someone from GusuLan, you of all people should understand what that means. You and your brother have a better relationship than Jiang Cheng and I do, and you're brothers by blood, not just martial brothers. But how sure are you that Zewu-Jun would intervene if you violated a major GusuLan

rule and the elders determined the penalty was to be whipped for it? Would he go against the sect rules to protect you?"

Lan Wangji seemed uncertain for the first time. Of course, the scenario that Wei Wuxian painted was a ridiculous one, because there was no way that the honorable Hanguang Jun would break a rule so serious as to deserve a whipping. But the point was valid.

"Jiang Wanyin said he would speak to Madam Yu on your behalf. He clearly did not," Lan Wangji said.

Wei Wuxian let out a bitter laugh. "Just because Jiang Cheng said something to her doesn't mean she listened. Don't forget, Lan Wangji. I may have been YunmengJiang's First Disciple, but I am still the son of a servant."

"They do not deserve Wei Ying," Lan Wangji said with controlled fury.

The words resonated with the murmurings that had surged through Wei Wuxian's mind back at Lotus Pier, but had subsided during their flight. At Lan Wangji's statement, he felt their tendrils wrapping around his thoughts again.

Wei Wuxian briefly pressed his fingers to his temples to try to focus on what was happening outside his own head.

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji asked, his voice much closer than it had been a moment ago. Wei Wuxian opened his eyes to find Lan Wangji looking down at him in concern. Wei Wuxian wasn't ready to discuss the voices that he still heard in his head despite Clarity being played and the resentful energy expelled from his meridians. It was much better than it had been in the Burial Mounds, so he was hoping this residual effect was only temporary.

Diversion had always worked best for Wei Wuxian when he had thoughts or emotions he didn't want others to read, and he felt no reason to deviate from that path in the current situation.

"Lan Zhan! Warn me before you say such things! I might think you actually mean them!" Wei Wuxian laughed, though it sounded forced even to his own ears.

Lan Wangji did not look fooled, but he didn't push. Whatever odd conversation that they had been having was over, at least for the moment.

Qinghe was a lot further north than Lotus Pier, and the spring air was colder. Wei Wuxian shivered slightly as a gust of chilly wind blew through their robes. Lan Wangji's gaze dropped from Wei Wuxian's face to his torso.

"Wei Ying is cold." Lan Wangji had not stepped back from when he had approached Wei Wuxian in concern moments earlier, and the proximity made Wei Wuxian feel a weird sort of tension that he didn't know what to do with. It only worsened when Lan Wangji reached two of his long, tapered fingers out to brush against the sleeve of Wei Wuxian's outer robe, testing the weight of the fabric.

"Wei Ying's robes are too thin." Lan Wangji's voice held more than a hint of displeasure, which was odd because it wasn't like he was the one who was wearing them.

Wei Wuxian forced his gaze away from Lan Wangji's face and, instead, looked down at his new robes. "Ah, Lan Zhan. Not all of us can afford fancy robes like you! The ones you gave me were awesome, but three months in the Burial Mounds didn't leave them in any sort of salvageable condition. I left them back in -," Wei Wuxian cut himself off, not really sure if Lan Wangji would want to know about the small cabin Wen Ning had found near Cloud Recesses. Wei Wuxian had been thinking of using it the next time he wanted to see A-Yuan.

"I will buy Wei Ying better robes."

"Lan Zhan! Don't worry about it. I'll just get them all dirty, anyway. I'm not like you. I'm really not meant for fancy things. Besides, we're going to war. Clothing doesn't really matter."

"Ridiculous." Lan Wangji gave Wei Wuxian's robes one final glare, then turned away and began walking towards the gates of the Unclean Realms.

Wei Wuxian didn't have much of a choice except to follow, and hoped that Lan Wangji was correct in his belief that having their presence known would not backfire on them.

They were immediately taken to see Nie Mingjue, the guards barely blinking at Lan Wangji's presence (and not really paying much attention to Wei Wuxian, which was probably all for the best). Nie Mingue greeted Lan Wangji cordially, in a way that spoke of familiarity, though not quite the warmth of friendship.

"What brings you here, Lan Wangji? Xichen did not mention he was sending anyone from Cloud Recesses, so I am guessing the news is urgent."

Wie Wuxian had never spent much time in Nie Mingue's presence. He'd seen him once or twice years ago when Nie Huaisang was at Cloud Recesses, but not recently. He was struck by the sheer physicality of the Nie Sect Leader. Wei Wuxian was relatively tall, but his build was lithe, made for speed and agility. Lan Wangji was slightly taller and broader - more solid - but with a graceful sort of strength.

Nie Mingue was built like a brick shithouse, and towered over both of them. There absolutely was nothing graceful about him, but Wei Wuxian would never want to go one-on-one with the man in a physical battle of any kind.

It was odd to think of him as Nie Huaisang's brother. Their builds could not be more opposite. Wei Wuxian knew that Red Blade Master was sometimes frustrated with his little brother's lack of physicality, but - having studied with Nie Huaisang during his brief period at Cloud Recesses - Wei Wuxian knew that there was a lot more to Nie Huaisang than just painted fans and porn. Not that there was anything wrong with either of those, but Wei Wuxian was somewhat surprised that Nie Mingjue had apparently not sent for his younger brother to meet them if he believed there was urgent news coming.

While Wei Wuxian had been considering these things, Lan Wangji had (tersely) explained what had been learned regarding the size and apparent intent of the Wen forces. Nie Mingjue's expression was grim.

"We will need to send out scouts immediately to determine their exact position so we can determine tactics," the Red Blade Master said, immediately going into full warrior mode. There

was not a hint of fear or panic on the older man's face, and Wei Wuxian suspected that Nie Mingjue was probably happier to be facing a potentially insurmountable army that he must attack immediately rather than a room full of sect figureheads that he would have to carefully negotiate peace with.

Wei Wuxian could relate, and he found himself grinning at the older man. He noticed Lan Wangji's eyes narrowing slightly, and tried to reign his amusement in. Lan Wangji knew Nie Mingjue much better than Wei Wuxian did, so if Lan Wangji thought it might annoy the older man to be girring at him while they discussed battle plans, Wei Wuxian would try to take the hint.

Nie Mingjue turned to one of the servants who had arrived bearing tea. "Fetch Meng Yao."

"Actually," Wei Wuxian spoke for the first time since greeting the Nie sect leader. "If you bring me some paper, I can draw out the troop locations."

Nie Mingjue looked at Wei Wuxian for a moment as a servant went and brought paper, ink, and a brush and placed them before Wei Wuxian. "This information is from Lotus Pier?"

Wei Wuxian could feel his face freeze. "Um, no. I brought the information to them, but they… may or may not act on it."

Lan Wangji didn't move a muscle, but somehow was suddenly exuding angry disdain from where he sat, motionless, at Wei Wuxian's side.

Nie Mingjue eyed Lan Wangji for a moment. "Hm. So what is the source of the information?"

Wei Wuxian described the events of killing Wen Chao, finding the papers, and then his scouting that revealed an army of more than double the size of what they had initially thought. Meng Yao arrived somewhere midway through the telling of it all, followed by Nie Huaisang.

Wei Wuxian had been drawing a map of the troop locations, and handed it to Nie Mingjue as he greeted his friend.

"Nie-xiong! I was wondering if you were going to show up."

"Wei-xiong! How could I stay away when I haven't seen you in so long! Where have you been?" Nie Huaisang's question at first seemed like a normal, casual greeting, but there was a flicker of something in the man's expression that made Wei Wuxian suddenly wonder if Nie Huaisang had already heard what had happened to him.

He introduced Wei Wuxian to Meng Yao, and then turned to the maps that Wei Wuxian had drawn. Nie Huaisang sat beside Wei Wuxian, on the opposite side from Lan Wangji, shifting close enough to brush shoulders as the crowded around the drawing.

Wei Wuxian finished explaining the source of the map.

"Ah, Wei-xiong! You were always so good at drawing. You have an artist's eye for remembering detail," Nie Huaisang said.

“And the core strength to fly high enough to get a larger view of the troop layout,” Nie Mingjue said, his voice showing a hint of approval that had Wei Wuxian feeling strange, as there was no voice scolding him for being too reckless or acting without permission or showing off the way it had always happened at Lotus Pier or Cloud Recesses.

Wei Wuxian felt an odd prickle of awareness along the back of his neck, and looked up to find Lan Wangji watching them. The man’s face was as smooth as ever, but Wei Wuxian could tell Lan Wangji was displeased about something.

It took him a moment to remember how offended Lan Wangji had been when Wei Wuxian had first begun using his birth name. Likely, Lan Wangji was displeased with Wei Wuxian’s casual greeting of Nie Huaisang. Wei Wuxian mentally shrugged it off. It didn’t offend Nei Huaisang, and this wasn’t Cloud Recesses. Perfect manners were not something Wei Wuxian had either the interest nor patience to master.

Nie Huaisang’s face was uncharacteristically serious as he looked at the maps, but it was Meng Yao who asked the question that Wei Wuxian had hoped would not come up, at least not this soon in the conversation.

“Wei gongzi. It is truly remarkable that you were able to gather this information so quickly. We had been aware that the Wen were building an army and hiring mercenaries, but we had no idea that it was at this scale.” Meng Yao cast a look at Red Blade Master, as though asking permission to continue. The older man grunted, and Meng Yao continued. “But, and forgive this one for asking what is likely a foolish question, how did Wei gongzi take out the entire garrison where Wen Chao had been hiding, as well as the mercenary camp all on his own? I had known the former First Disciple of YunmengJiang was gifted, but this far exceeds any power of that sect I’ve ever heard of.”

Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji exchanged a glance. Neither was surprised at the question, but there was a degree of risk to revealing what Wei Wuxian had become. Lan Wangji seemed to be leaving it up to Wei Wuxian on how to play this, which Wei Wuxian appreciated. There was little doubt that Wei Wuxian’s heretical cultivation would become known before too much longer, but it didn’t need to be the opening salvo of the discussion.

Wei Wuxian gave a lazy smile, his eyes half lidded. “Ah. Meng Yao. You ask the hard questions right off the bat. It’s been several years since I was part of the YunmengJiang sect. I have learned some new tricks.”

It was not an answer, and everyone in the room knew it.

Meng Yao bowed. “This one is sorry if the question offended.”

Wei Wuxian waved his hand slightly, feeling wary about the man’s extreme polite humbleness. No one who was as intelligent as the Meng Yao seemed to be could truly be that humble. It put Wei Wuxian on edge. “It was a good question. Let’s just work our way up to that one.”

He turned and saw Nie Huaisang studying him from behind his fan.

“The Wen army outnumbers us 20 to 1 and already have positional advantage from how they’ve arranged their forces,” Nie Mingjue stated bluntly. “Even if they divide their forces in half and send some to Lotus Pier, our chances of victory are small. If we had more time to plan, it might

be different. But they won't stay still long and lose any benefit of surprise that they might have. If you have a way to take them out, the Nie sect would be in your debt."

Wei Wuxian drummed his fingers on the table for a moment, debating what to reveal. "I used talismans, for the most part, on Wen Chao's garrison. But I'm not sure the same tactic would work with these camps."

"What sort of talisman could take out an entire garrison without draining the cultivator?" Nie Mingjue asked, skeptically.

"One that calls all the resentful spirits of the people that the garrison had murdered, and lets them target those who wronged them," Wei Wuxian stated calmly, as though discussing the weather.

There was silence in the room as everyone digested what that implied. Wei Wuxian hadn't yet revealed that he used Yin energy to write the talismans, though - honestly - it was not necessary. It was how he controlled the spirits with his *dizi* that really crossed the line. Nie Huaisang was watching him again, his eyes focused in a way that Wei Wuxian had seen flickers of in the past but never been the subject of.

"That technique…," Meng Yao began, carefully choosing his words. "It is not a traditional cultivation approach."

"No. It isn't," Wei Wuxian replied. He kept his tone neutral. If they refused his help or condemned him, he would just add another sect to the list that wanted nothing to do with him.

Nie Mingjue scowled, his eyes lifting briefly to look at Wei Wuxian before returning to the map that showed Wen forces encircling his sect.

"It is surprising that GusuLan is supportive of this. While I am far from claiming to understand GusuLan philosophy in its entirety, their approach to such matters has always seemed quite… rigid," Meng Yao continued, looking this time at Lan Wangji.

Lan Wangji's eyes narrowed, but Wei Wuxian spoke before anyone else could. "Oh, yeah. Lan Qiren threw me out of Cloud Recesses a long time ago just for bringing it up. But you probably knew that, right, Meng Yao? They haven't issued a formal edict against me, but it's likely only a matter of time."

"But Hanguang-Jun is here accompanying you," Nie Huaisang pointed out, lowering his fan only brief enough to speak the words before his fan was snapped back into place.

"Wei Wuxian did not choose demonic cultivation," Lan Wangji said tersely, as though this was far from the first time he has made this particular point to a room full of skeptics.

Wei Wuxian didn't bother to try to clarify that it wasn't true demonic cultivation, despite corpses being involved. He disturbed the dead, but he didn't take over living humans with his power.

"Oh?" Nei Huaisang questioned, his eyes wide in an expression that conveyed confusion. Wei Wuxian recognized the look from when they were younger and Nie Huaisang was trying to get out of trouble by pretending he was confused about a rule rather than intentionally disobeying..

“Does it matter how?” Wei Wuxian asked, tired of the hints and insinuation that both Nie Huaisang and Meng Yao seemed to be dancing around. “There are troops at your doorstep. If you cannot defeat them on your own, I am offering my help. If you find my method of helping unpalatable, then you can join Cloud Recesses and Louts Pier in sending me on my way.”

“Wei-xiong!” Nie Huaisang chided, casting an arm around Wei Wuxian’s shoulders. “Don’t be so defensive. Big Brother is a legend on the battlefield, and even he couldn’t take out so many all at once. You came to our aid. And it’s not like we haven’t had other sects criticize our own method of cultivation, either. Who are we to judge, right Big Brother?”

Lan Wangji’s air of displeasure deepened, as he glared at Nie Huaisang. Wei Wuxian wondered why... Nie Huaisang was standing up for him. But maybe Lan Wangji didn’t like the Nie method of cultivating compared with what Wei Wuxian was doing. Nie Huaisang noticed Lan Wangji’s death glare and removed his arm from Wei Wuxian’s shoulder.

Red Blade Master looked at them for a moment. “There is no way we can defeat this many on our own. If you will help us fight, then I will not be so prideful as to turn you away just because you use a method of cultivation that others disapprove of. But you said earlier that the talismans that you applied in the Wen camp won’t work. How can you help us, aside from just adding another skilled blade to our army?”

Wei Wuxian blinked for a moment at the fact that fucking *Red Blade Master* had just called him skilled with a blade.

“That’s right. The talisman only works if they have killed enough people within the range of the spell’s effect to be summoned and take them out. The mercenaries have not been as ruthless as the Wen, so I don’t know if it would work, and it would take too much time. As soon as they see camps start to fall, they will attack with their remaining forces.”

Nie Mingjue gave a sharp nod in acknowledgement of Wei Wuxian’s rationale.

“Ok, so the talismans won’t work. But you said you could help. What is your plan?”

Wei Wuxian sent a sidelong glance at Lan Wangji, but the man’s face was as unreadably thick as ever. He had been thinking of what might be enough to take out the massive force that was closing in on them, and he had only been able to come up with one way that was guaranteed to work. It was brute force, and would likely take a serious toll on him physically and mentally, but they would only have one shot at this or all three sects would find themselves wiped out.

Lan Wangji was going to hate it.

“If you can hold out for three days, I can bring you a thousand undead soldiers to fight in your war,” Wei Wuxian stated, his eyes locked with Nie Mingjue’s so he did not miss the way they widened in shock.

If he had thought the silence was noticeable with his first admission of cultivating resentful energy, it was nothing to the absolute shock that greeted him now.

To be continued...

Chapter 19: Positioning the pieces on the chessboard

A/N - This chapter is arriving a full day early because the wonderful Zazgeek has offered to be my beta!! They helped proofread this chapter, which usually would have taken me a full day to manage. Thank you!!!

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If he had thought the silence was noticeable with his first admission of cultivating resentful energy, it was nothing to the absolute shock that greeted him now.

"Wei Ying." Despite his reputation for silence, Lan Wangji was the first to speak. His voice was full of tension.

Wei Wuxian turned towards him, seeing Lan Wangji's hands clenched into fists by his sides.

"Lan Zhan. I know you don't approve. If anyone here can come up with an alternative, I'm all ears. But we don't have a lot of time. And I *know* this will work."

Lan Wangji's lips tightened. "Dangerous. For Wei Ying."

"It's a lot less dangerous than standing and fighting with just my sword. If I do this, we have a chance. If I don't…," he looked back over to Nie Mingjue, Meng Yao, and Nie Huaisang. Later, he would need to process the fact that Lan Wangji honestly seemed more concerned about Wei Wuxian's safety than he did about the survival of the sects. He was likely missing something, but he had to stay focused on the matter at hand because the decision needed to be made soon if there was going to be any chance of his plan working. Wei Wuxian let his gaze linger the longest on Nie Huaisang. "Nie-xiong. Do you see any other way?"

Nie Mingjue was the only one in the room surprised at the fact that Wei Wuxian was directing his question to the person that the rest of the cultivation world would consider the most useless one in the room.

Nie Huaisang's eyes widened, and his head began to shake back and forth. "Why are you asking me? I don't know. I really couldn't say. I mean… it's not like there's another sect we could call on for aid, right?"

"Has word been sent to Koi Tower?" Meng Yao asked, directing his question to both Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian.

"Considering they are bankrolling the Wen army, I don't think they would be willing to help us," Wei Wuxian replied.

Meng Yao's face broke into an expression that seemed to genuine be shock, and Wei Wuxian realized it was probably the first real emotion he'd seen on the man's face since he'd arrived.

“A-Yao, did your contact at Koi Tower say anything about this?” Nie Mingjue asked, scowling.

“No! I don’t think…,” Meng Yao stopped himself, then looked at Wei Wuxian. “Why do you think the Jin are supporting the Wen forces? They are arranging an alliance through marriage with Lotus Pier. Why go to war?”

Wei Wuxian quickly replayed his interaction with Wen Chao’s revelation about the *Xiangliu* ’s targets, as well as the assessment of the size and cost of the mercenary army.

“No one other than the Jin has the gold to bankroll this,” Wei Wuxian concluded.

“And, I mean, I don’t really know much about warfare, but it seems to me that the Jin army has always been weaker than the other sects. Their strength has always been financial. The alliance with Yunmeng Jiang would give them influence while Jiang Fengmian is sect leader, but Jiang Cheng is less likely to take direction from another sect. Influence isn’t really the same as ownership, is it? I mean, maybe.” Nie Huaisang fanned himself rapidly, as though trying to dispel the fact that he’d contributed meaningfully to the conversation.

Nie Mingjue looked at his little brother with something akin to wonder on his face, but then he nodded tersely. “The Jin care more about the embroidery on their robes than their sword skills. Jin Guangshan cares only for what will increase his bank accounts and give him access to more women in his bed. He has no honor. This move does not surprise me, if true.”

Meng Yao looked down for a moment, clearly processing what was being said. Aftera moment, he resumed his study of the map. The cost of funding such an army would be obvious, and the financial status of the varying sects was no secret. The truth of the Jin Sect’s complicity was set plainly before them.

Wei Wuxian remembered the whispered statements about Meng Yao’s parentage, and felt a twinge of guilt at being the one to bring this news of how the man’s father had behaved so cravenly, hiding behind his money and letting others do the fighting for him.

“It could be true,” Meng Yao said after a moment. “Sect Leader Jin thinks only of himself. Funding a war from a distance, where he believes the spoils of war will be divided but the physical and reputational risks will be borne solely by the Wen - is absolutely something he would do.”

Nie Huaisang fluttered his fan. “Jin Guangshan *believes* the spoils of war will be divided?” His tone of voice was innocent, but the question was definitely not.

Meng Yao shot Nie Huaisang a surprised look at the fact that the man had caught Meng Yao’s implication, then he smiled slightly in acknowledgement. “I don’t think any reasonable person would expect Wen Ruohan to actually divide the spoils after they win the war and no one is left to protect the Jin. The Jin have a small army and will be short on funds to hire more troops until Wen Rouhan pays them back.”

Wei Wuxian had made it a point to spend as little time as possible in the presence of any Jin, but especially Jin Guangshan. “Is he really that short-sighted?”

Meng Yao gave an odd smile. “My father is too blinded by both drink and pride to see danger standing right in front of him, especially if that danger is couched in flattery and promises of

wealth and power."

Wei Wuxian had never thought much about Meng Yao in the past, only having met him briefly at Cloud Recesses many years ago. His initial impression had been relatively neutral, with nothing standing out to him as particularly noteworthy except for the shitty way that some people spoke of Meng Yao's parentage. Wei Wuxian had felt a certain amount of kinship with him over that, having faced similar whispers in Lotus Pier. He realized now that Meng Yao had a lot more going on behind his polite smile than he had realized, and he was grateful that he was under Nie Mingjue's mentorship rather than Jin Guangshan's.

Meng Yao continued, ignorant of Wei Wuxian's internal thoughts. "I suppose he is keeping his involvement secret from even his closest advisors so that - if it falls through - he can deny any knowledge and resume his efforts to form an alliance with Yunmeng Jiang. I had wondered why he kept delaying choosing an auspicious date when Jin Zixuan was clearly pushing for it."

Wei Wuxian's head snapped up at the mention of Jin Zixuan's name. "The peacock *wants* to marry my Shijie now? Since when? All he did was run his stupid mouth off about how plain she was before."

Meng Yao raised his hands appeasingly at Wei Wuxian's show of temper. "I am only repeating what I have heard. Jin Zixuan has had a change of heart. I am certain that his father is keeping the plan to attack Lotus Pier from him, or he would have immediately had Young Lady Jiang sent to Koi Tower for safety, even if he had to use a pretense to do so."

Wei Wuxian drummed his fingers restlessly on the table as the conversation continued around him, his mind now returning to how to help evacuate Lotus Pier when Madam Yu had refused his help. Even if he didn't like the Peacock, if the man could keep his sister safe, then Wei Wuxian would have no problem asking the man for help. The problem was, there was a wall of enemy troops between Koi Tower and Lotus Pier.

"...Wei-xiong?" Nie Huaisang's voice broke through Wei Wuxian's reverie.

"Sorry, what?" Wei Wuxian looked up to see both Nie Mingjue and Lan Wangji frowning at him. "I was just thinking of Lotus Pier."

Nie Mingjue's frown deepened. "You showed Sect Leader Jiang these same troop movements?"

"Yes. And Jiang Cheng and Madam Yu," Wei Wuxian said with a heavy sigh.

"And they refused any help at all?" Nie Mingjue said in disbelief.

Wei Wuxian gave a cold smile. "Well, any help from *me.* Madam Yu said that she wasn't going to take my word on any of it. The troops, the Jin involvement… she told me Lotus Pier did not need my help."

Nie Mingjue scoffed. "I knew that Madam Yu had issues with your parentage, but this affects her sect's survival. Jiang Fengmian agreed with her?"

Wei Wuxian's expression gave his answer for him.

“Madam Yu attempted to use Zidian on him for entering Yunmeng Jiang territory to warn them,” Lan Wangji said. His voice was low and well modulated, but there was no mistaking the hard edge of anger in it.

“ *Attempted?”* Nie Huaisang asked.

“I intervened,” Lan Wangji said flatly.

“Mm,” Nie Mingjue said, looking for a moment between Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji. “I see. Well, if the sect leaders of Yunmeng Jiang are too prideful or too cowardly to ask for help when it is offered, then there is no point in trying to include them in our battle plan. Will GusuLan be sending cultivators?”

Nie Mingjue turned to Lan Wangji, who gave a brief nod. “Brother has not seen the newest information regarding the increased number of Wen troops. But even without that, he was planning to send a force to support the Unclean Realms.”

Nie Mingjue nodded, and Meng Yao spoke up. “We should notify Cloud Recesses immediately. If I could copy this map, I could take it to Zewu-Jun directly. I will not be of much help when it comes to the actual fighting, but I can assist in coordinating attack plans between the two groups.”

“Are we really just going to leave Lotus Pier to die?” Wei Wuxian asked, his insides twisting as his fists clenched. “They wouldn’t accept *my* help, but that doesn’t mean they won’t accept help from the other sects. I am a banished rogue cultivator. It’s hardly surprising that Madam Yu turned away my offer. Cloud Recesses would likely do the same.”

Nie Mingjue gave Wei Wuxian a hard look. “If you really can summon an army of a thousand and have it marching into battle in three days, then any sect that chooses to make an enemy out of you rather than an ally is a fool. You informed them of the odds and they chose to refuse your help based on their principles. If they doom their sect for it, then it was their choice. They would not be the first cultivation sect to fall due to pride.”

“But what about the civilians! The Wen burned Caiyi Town and killed anyone they could find when they failed to take Cloud Recesses. Those people don’t have a choice about pride or philosophy or anything else. And the younger disciples, what about them? They will be slaughtered for nothing!” Wei Wuxian could feel the resentment churning up in him again, the murmurings in his head getting louder. Without conscious thought, his left hand gripped *Chenqing* g and his right clenched into a fist so tight that his nails drew blood from the palms of his hands.

“Wei Ying. Calm down.”

He felt a weight on his arm and looked up to see Lan Wangji’s hand resting on it. Nie Mingjue’s eyes were wary, and Meng Yao had drawn back slightly. Nie Huaisang was simply watching him from behind his fan, though his eyes dropped momentarily to where Lan Wangji’s hand was resting.

“Wei-xiong. I am not sure, but maybe there is a way to help any refugees from Lotus Pier even without you going there directly. You are going to deliver your army of undead to fight with us

here. If the civilians of Yunmeng Jiang were to follow your army, it would clear the path for them as long as they stayed back." Nie Huaisang said, his voice calm and serious for once.

It took a moment for the implications of what Nie Huaisang was saying to sink in. The Burial Mounds were near Yiling, nearly as far south as Lotus Pier, but just slightly further west. The Wen troops had moved in from the north and west, blocking access to almost all the other sects. But Nie Huaisang was right that - following the path of his army - refugees from Lotus Pier could likely make it to Cloud Recesses or the Unclean Realms. But the only way Nie Huaisang would have come up with this plan was if he knew where Wei Wuxian was raising his army from.

"You know where I'm going," Wei Wuxian said, looking at Nie Huaisang and not sure how he felt about that fact that his old friend had figured that out.

Nie Huaisang fluttered his fan, making himself look very flustered and ineffectual, when - in fact - he was most definitely not.

"I don't know. How could I know? It's only… you went missing for several months, and no one heard from you. Given your communication talisman, there are very few places that could have caused that to happen unless you were dead, which… you obviously aren't?"

Meng Yao's eyes widened in surprise, but Nie Mingjue's narrowed in confusion.

"Huaisang. Where is Wei Wuxian getting his army from?"

Nie Huaisang turned to his brother, his fan still fluttering. "I don't know. I really don't know for sure. It was just a guess."

" *Huaisang,* " his brother said, warningly. "Don't play games. It's clear that you guessed correctly, and you know it. Where."

Nie Huaisang glanced over at Wei Wuxian, who shrugged his permission. "The Burial Mounds."

Red Blade Master turned to look at Wei Wuxian. "How?"

Wei Wuxian hated thinking about that time. Hated talking about it. It brought everything back in a rush. The endless darkness. The voices. The taste and smell of death. He wished Wen Chao had never opened his stupid fucking mouth and told Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng, but if others knew, then Red Blade Master migh as well hear it from him directly.

He lounged back in his chair, his legs spread in front of him. He would not show weakness in front of these men. It was a risk for anyone to see how damaged he was. Damaged cultivators with extreme powers were a threat, and would be treated as such. So he would put on an air of being in control.

"I was qi drained after fighting the *Xiangliu* . Wen Chao caught me. He was worried I'd come back as a vengeful spirit and kill him. So he tried to make sure I didn't." Wei Wuxian allowed a cold smile to curve his lips. "Turned out he was wrong. I came back and killed him anyway."

Lan Wangji's hand was still resting on Wei Wuxian's forearm, his long fingers tightened their grip as silence once again descended in the room.

Wei Wuxian kept his face hard. The Lan elders had condemned him for learning heretical cultivation, even though they knew the circumstances. The Jiang sect had turned his help away before he'd even firmly crossed the line on cultivating resentful energy. He had zero expectations that the Nie would be any different.

After a moment, Nie Mingjue began to chuckle, then threw his head back and laughed.

Wei Wuxian had no idea what to make of it. He could not recall seeing the man laugh before, and would never have imagined he would do so at this particular revelation.

"Wen Chao was always a disappointment to his father as a cultivator. He should have been Jin Guangshan's son instead. To think that Wen Chao's fear of one *qi*- drained cultivator created the force that is going to lose the Wen this war," Red Blade Master snorted a final laugh. "It would be an honor to have you fight on our side, Wei-gongzi. Anyone who can survive the Burial Mounds and come out stronger is an ally I want to have."

Wei Wuxian felt as though he were having an out-of-body experience. They had learned all of his darkest secrets.

And they were accepting him anyway. Lan Wangji was still standing by his side, the weight and warmth of his hand acting like an anchor point for Wei Wuxian to hold to. He could not understand any of the emotions that were surging through him in that moment.

Wei Wuxian's throat tightened. "Then I will bring you an army, Red Blade Master."

He would fight to the death for the men in that room. He would keep them safe.

The receiving room where Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian had been initially escorted to as important visitors to Sect Leader Nie was quickly transformed into a full war room. Red Blade Master had a large map of his territory brought in, and Wei Wuxian placed markers on all the Wen troop locations. Meng Yao quickly drew out a detailed copy of the map as he and Nie Huaisang debated back and forth about the best tactics on how to hold off that many troops for three days while Nie Mingjue watched in bemusement. The Nie sect leader was unstoppable on a battlefield, but he was not a tactician.

Wei Wuxian had the feeling that Nie Huaisang's days of being able to laze around with his fans and his erotic books would be coming to an end now that his older brother realized the skill that he had in terms of strategy. It may have taken a direct threat to his brother and home for Nie Huaisang to engage, but there was no going back for him now. Meng Yao seemed to be enjoying having a sparring partner for his ideas as well, though both were feeling the pressure of time as Meng Yao needed to deliver the message to Cloud Recesses.

Red Blade Master divided his time between engaging in tactical discussions and working with his troops to ensure they were getting ready for a fight. The Nie cultivators seemed to relish the idea of an impending battle with lopsided odds rather than fearing it. The entirety of the Unclean Realms bustled with purposeful activity as weapons were made ready and supplies were checked.

Wei Wuxian turned to Lan Wangji, who had not participated much in the conversation about battle plans.

“Lan Zhan. Don’t you have anything to add to their discussion? You were there when Cloud Recesses were attacked, and you’ve studied countless battles in your history books. I’m surprised you aren’t already claiming your own division to lead. I’m sure Red Blade Master would welcome the esteemed Second Jade’s ideas.”

“I will stay with Wei Ying. The GusuLan reinforcements will arrive quickly, when Meng Yao informs Brother.”

Wei Wuxian stilled. He would be lying if he said that he didn’t enjoy Lan Wangji’s company. Lan Wangji was an amazingly powerful cultivator with unmatched reflexes and instincts. But more than that, he was steadfast and calm where Wei Wuxian was volatile and unpredictable. Having him with Wei Wuxian when he was navigating enemy territory would be a huge help if he ran into trouble before he reached the Burial Mounds.

But once he reached his destination....

Wei Wuxian had been surprised at how far Lan Wangji had already gone in his defense. He’d not turned from Wei Wuxian when he’d killed Wen Chao and his entire division. He’d argued against his sect leaders. He’d *blocked* Zidian’s blow.

But what Wei Wuxian was about to do at the Burial Mounds would go far beyond anything he’d done before. He wouldn’t just be manipulating Yin energy or spirits. He would be raising an entire army of corpses to fight for him.

“Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian began. “You know what I’m going to do, right? Do you really want to be a part of it? What will Lan Qiren say? It’s one thing to already be on the battlefield and have an army of corpses arrive. It’s another to be riding with me at the head of it.”

“I will stay with Wei Ying.” There was a note of steel in Lan Wangji’s voice that kept Wei Wuxian from asking if he was sure. After all, when was Lan Wangji ever anything but sure? Wei Wuxian felt his face heat, even as he wondered what he could possibly have done to deserve Lan Wangji’s support.

“Lan Zhan! You need to warn me before saying such things. I’ll start reading all kinds of things into it!” Wei Wuxian felt a jumble of confused emotions inside.

He had honestly expected Lan Wangji to turn away from him long ago. When they had first met in Cloud Recesses, Lan Wangji had seemed so annoyed with Wei Wuxian all the time, constantly irritated at everything Wei Wuxian had said or done. But now, he was standing by Wei Wuxian’s side even when he was violating some of the most fundamental rules of the cultivation world. He would not even have blamed him for shunning him now.

Yet somehow, by some strange karmic fluke, Lan Wangji had decided that Wei Wuxian was worthy of his friendship. It was a huge mistake, of course. Wei Wuxian was most certainly *not* worthy, but Lan Wangji was just so *good* . It was humbling, to be one of the few people that Lan Wangji would stand with in battle. There would be consequences for it, of course. The rest of the cultivation world would not be so forgiving as Lan Wangji.

Wei Wuxian promised himself that he would do everything he could to shield Lan Wangji from any of the backlash that was going to be coming for him.

“Lan Zhan. Thank you,” Wei Wuxian said, turning away to break the strange tension that seemed to suddenly fill the room.

“There is no need for thanks,” Lan Wangji replied, which somehow only added another five emotions that Wei Wuxian couldn’t name swirling into the tangled mess of everything he’d already been feeling.

Wei Wuxian was almost glad of the raised voices that interrupted their conversation. He turned to see Nie Huaisang dressing down Nie Mingjue’s captain of the guard.

“I’m not asking you to take orders from Meng Yao’s mother. I’m telling you to take orders from *him*. Big Brother has put us in charge of setting the strategy for defending against the Wen attack. I might be confused but isn’t your job to follow your sect leader’s orders in a time of war, rather than waste time questioning them?”

Meng Yao had been looking down, his fists clenched. Wei Wuxian had not heard what had set the whole thing off, but he was familiar enough with the condescending sneer on the guard’s face to be able to take a good guess.

“Nie-xiong. Meng Yao. What’s going on here?” Wei Wuxian walked up, joining the small group.

Whatever part of the plan had been communicated, it clearly included some sort of description of what Wei Wuxian’s contribution was going to be because the guard’s eyes widened in fear and he took a full step back. Wei Wuxian smiled at him, knowing that the coldness in his eyes would make it clear the smile was not a friendly one.

“There is no problem. I-It will be as you said,” the man stammered, not even daring to look at Meng Yao before turning and leaving the room.

Nie Huaisang looked over at Meng Yao. “Is he always like this?”

Meng Yao did not look up. “He’s not wrong. I am the son of a whore.”

WeiWuxian snorted. “You’re the son of a woman who did anything she had to to keep you alive. There is no shame in that. People say a lot of shit about my mother, too. If she were alive, she’d light them all on fire.”

Meng Yao looked up at his words, a small smile on his lips. “From what I heard, I think you’re right.”

“Ok, so are we good here? I should leave as soon as possible if I’m going to be back in three days. The corpses can’t fly, so we’ll be walking the whole way back.”

Nie Huaisang didn’t even flinch at the mention of an army of walking corpses.

“Meng Yao is also about to leave for Cloud Recesses. I will stay with Big Brother.”

Everyone knew that Red Blade Master was extremely protective about his younger brother. Wei Wuxian wasn't sure exactly what it was about Nie Huaisang's words, but he suddenly realized that the feeling ran both ways. He pitied anyone who was ever foolish enough to try to harm Red Blade Master.

There must have been something in Wei Wuxian's expression, because Nie Huaisang met his gaze with none of the teasing that he usually had.

"You should let Jiang Wanyin and Young Lady Jiang know where to go to meet the Gusu reinforcements," Lan Wangji said, breaking the odd exchange.

"Yeah. Right. Meng Yao, you're leaving now as well? Zewu-Jun needs to know where to send help to the Jiang refugees, and I don't know how much time we have before the attack begins." Wei Wuxian didn't like that he would need to place his trust in someone he did not know very well, but there were not a lot of options.

"Yes," Meng Yao said politely. "I will go to Zewu-Jun and inform him of the situation."

"I will also message Brother. He will send help," Lan Wangji said firmly. Wei Wuxian relaxed slightly.

Nie Mingjue joined them, having returned from inspecting the readiness of the troops.

"A-Yao, you should go. We need to notify Cloud Recesses as soon as possible."

Meng Yao bowed, and took his leave.

"We will also leave now," Wei Wuxian said, bowing to the Nie brothers. Neither Nie Mingjue nor Nie Huaisang reacted at all to the news that Lan Wangji was - for some reason - accompanying Wei Wuxian instead of staying at the Unclean Realms.

Wei Wuxian had no idea what to make of that.

To be continued...

A/N - Now we will have lwj and wwx spend some alone time. I mean, alone except for a thousand walking dead but like... almost alone? LOL.

Chapter 20: A night of respite

A/N - Sorry this chapter is a week late! I have been having a lot of irl stress and my anxiety was sort of knocking me down. ZazGeek, who has once again generously beta'd this chapter - calmed me down and got me writing again. This chapter is for them, particularly the hair combing scene. Thank you!!

Also, I am sorry I am late replying to comments. When I get stressed it is hard for me to reply, but I will reply to each one and honestly it is all your lovely comments that make it fun for me to keep writing, so thanks to all of you who commented!!

Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji left the Unclean Realm taking almost the exact same route as they had arrived by only a few hours earlier. It was late morning, and Wei Wuxian realized only about thirty minutes into their journey to the south that the last full meal he'd eaten had been back with Wen Qing, Wen Ning, and A-Yuan more than a full day ago.

He wondered how they were doing; if his foray into 'demonic cultivation' was causing them any problems with the GusuLan elders. As far as he'd seen, Lan Wangji had not received any messages from his sect, and Wei Wuxian hoped that meant that they were either still deciding or had determined that - as long as Wei Wuxian stayed out of their territory - they would let the matter rest. He just didn't want his friends to bear the cost of his mistakes. Zewu-Jun had given his word that he would protect them, but that was a long time ago, and under different circumstances.

And then there was Lotus Pier. Was his *Shijie* alright? And Jiang Cheng? And SectLeader Jiang and all the younger disciples? How could Wei Wuxian possibly protect them all? He'd felt sure back at the Unclean Realm that the plan he had come up with was the best one, but what if he was wrong? What if everyone died and it was all his fault? Panic and uncertainty overwhelmed him causing his trajectory on his sword to wobble.

"Wei Ying."

Lan Wangji was beside him instantly, his quiet, solid strength stilling some of the swirling, frantic chaos inside Wei Wuxian's mind. Wei Wuxian drew a breath, trying to steady himself. Lan Wangji's presence seemed to seep into his pores, allowing him to settle his racing thoughts enough to at least stay on his sword.

"Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian replied, not really sure how to articulate anything he was feeling in that moment. He nearly reached out to grab Lan Wangji's hand, but realized at the last instant how odd that would seem. And how dangerous, as they were both still on their swords, flying at a break-neck pace towards the Burial Mounds.

"We have all chosen this path. There were no perfect options. We each will do our best," Lan Wangji stated.

The subtle reminder that it hadn't been Wei Wuxian's call on his own helped settle his nerves. Nie Mingjue and Nie Huaisang had also agreed. He didn't know Meng Yao as well, but it was

clear the man was intelligent and he had not had a better alternative, either. Wei Wuxian felt a surge of gratitude towards Lan Wangji. Despite being a man of so few words, he knew exactly what to say.

Wei Wuxian had heard many people describe Lan Wangji as cold or emotionless. At one point in time, Wei Wuxian had been one of those people, and it shamed him to realize how wrong he had been. Lan Wangji was resolute, not emotionless. His calmness was due to his depth, not his emptiness.

Wei Wuxian was unbearably grateful for his presence with him on this journey. Wei Wuxian's mind had always been tumultuous, running wild with both strong emotions and dangerous ideas. Since the Burial Mounds, all of that had been amplified even more, in ways that he was only just beginning to understand and not always control. Somehow, Lan Wangji had become his anchor, steadying him when he felt himself start to splinter. He hoped Lan Wangji's presence would be enough to see him through what he had to do next.

The slight mist they had been flying through for the past hour had turned into a steady, chilling rain. As most cultivators with a strong golden core, Wei Wuxian didn't feel the cold as much as a non-cultivator would. But whether it was the lack of food, or the Yin energy that was still in his body, even with his pathways cleared, he shivered.

"We should eat and rest," Lan Wangji said. "There is a small town nearby."

Wei Wuxian frowned. "It will lose us time."

As though actively taking Lan Wangji's side in the argument, the rain intensified, making it hard to see where they were going.

"We will need to rest before we begin the march to battle. We will lose less time if we rest during the storm," Lan Wangji said, turning the direction of his sword to head to the village that Wei Wuxian knew was not far from their location.

It would be one of the last towns before they arrived at the Burial Mounds. While Wei Wuxian wanted to just push through, he remembered Wen Qing's warning about the risks of using Yin energy if his core was not full. He had no idea what the upcoming battle would entail, but having at least the option to switch to Yang energy without destroying his core seemed like a good idea. And his body still had not recovered from his time in the Burial Mounds. As much as he hated to admit it, he needed food and sleep if he was going to be able to pull off what he had promised Nie Mingjue.

"Fine," Wei Wuxian muttered, sending a suspicious look at Lan Wangji who was showing no signs of being affected by either the cold nor lack of food. Had Wen Qing told him about the risks to his core, or was Lan Wangji just being cautious?

Lan Wangji didn't even have the grace to look smug about Wei Wuxian's capitulation as they made their way through the driving rain to find a place to stay for the night.

The village was small and had only a tavern with a few rooms up above. Lan Wangji asked for two rooms, with hot baths and a hot meal to be sent up immediately.

Wei Wuxian tried not to shiver, and to ignore the way his soaked robes stuck to his skin uncomfortably. He was not entirely successful, but he hoped that no one noticed.

“I’m sorry, young lord,” the innkeeper said, quickly taking in Lan Wangji’s expensive robes and bowing apologetically. “Two of our guests have delayed their departure due to the rain. One of them might leave later this evening, but as of now I only have one room available. It has two beds, if that would suffice?”

Wei Wuxian had grown up swimming with his martial brothers, so bathing in front of others wasn’t really a big deal to him. Cloud Recesses, however, was a sect where its members typically wore no less than five layers of clothing at all times, possibly even with their spouses. Wei Wuxian was therefore surprised when Lan Wangji agreed to the innkeeper’s offering with a terse nod.

“What? It’s fine, Lan Zhan. I can eat down here and wait for the other room to open up.”

Lan Wangji shot him a deadly side-eye, then returned his gaze back to the innkeeper.

The innkeeper looked from Wei Wuxian to Lan Wangji. Lan Wangji’s face didn’t seem to change expression at all, but the innkeeper suddenly paled and bowed several times rapidly as he called for one of his workers to get water heating for two baths, then turned and directed them to follow him to the room.

Wei Wuxian briefly thought about objecting, but - honestly - he didn’t have an issue with it himself, so if Lan Wangji wasn’t going to object then he wouldn’t either.

The room was larger than expected given the size of the inn, and one of the workers came in behind them and set up a privacy screen for bathing. Lan Wangji paid the innkeeper, and the man departed with promises of hot water and hot food as soon as possible.

“You should really give lessons on how to do that glare thing you do,” Wei Wuxian said, trying to fill the silence in the room.

Lan Wangji did not reply other than to treat Wei Wuxian to said glare.

“See? I could rant and rave all day long, but all you need to do is look at people and they jump to do your bidding.”

A brazier had been lit in the room, and Wei Wuxian moved over by it, grateful for its warmth. The village was too far south to have *kang* to heat the bed area, but the innkeeper had anticipated his guests needing to warm and dry themselves in their rooms during the spring storm.

Wei Wuxian undid the ties to remove his soaked outer robe so he could hang it to dry. While his efforts in speaking to Lan Wangji had failed to garner a response, evidently the process of removing his outer robe was more effective.

“What are you doing?” Lan Wangji asked sharply, glancing at Wei Wuxian then quickly looking away.

Wei Wuxian rolled his eyes. “I’m taking off my fucking freezing robes. You’re the one who insisted on sharing a room so we could warm up. If it bothers you, just turn around so you don’t have to watch me.”

Lan Wangji’s eyes narrowed. “They will be coming with the bathwater soon. You can disrobe after they have left.”

Wei Wuxian laughed. “Lan Zhan! You’re so funny. We’re not in Cloud Recesses. It’s much less formal out here. Of anyone in this inn, you’re the one most likely to take offense at seeing me without my outer robes. I’m sure the innkeeper is used to seeing people in their rooms in all types of dishevelment when they’ve been caught in a storm.”

Lan Wangji did not seem amused by Wei Wuxian’s observation. He continued to look sternly at him as Wei Wuxian finished removing his outer robe, then hung it near the brazier to dry. Wei Wuxian ignored him. If Lan Wangji was going to worry about appearances, that was his business, but Wei Wuxian really didn’t give a fuck. He pulled the ribbon from his hair, letting his hair fall loosely down his back. He could hear some sort of noise from Lan Wangji’s direction, but he didn’t bother arguing about it. He was cold, and he wasn’t going to warm up if he stayed drenched.

“I’ll spare your delicate sensibilities and keep my inner robes on until they have the bath here, but I’m warning you right now, I’m going to dry *all* of my clothes. The innkeeper will likely have some spare robes that I can use for sleeping. I’m sure we’re far from the first guests they’ve had who’ve been caught in a downpour.”

“Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji began, his voice heavy with disapproval, but he was interrupted by a knock at the door.

Two servants entered, carrying large buckets of hot water for the tub. Lan Wangji stepped in front of Wei Wuxian, holding his arm out, the long sleeve of his outer robe providing a barrier between Wei Wuxian and the men entering the room.

“Oh, my god, Lan Zhan!” Wei Wuxian laughed, though he didn’t try to push Lan Wangji’s arm down or step away from him. “You’re like a governess, protecting my chastity. I’m sure these guys have more things to worry about than what random guests look like with their outer robes off.”

The younger of the two men looked up at Wei Wuxian’s words and shot him a smirk. This seemed to only irritate Lan Wangji *more* , since he raised his arm so his sleeve was now blocking the entirety of Wei Wuxian’s face as well as his body. Evidently the sight of Wei Wuxian’s hair down was also unseemly to Lan Wangji.

“Shameless,” Lan Wangji stated.

Wei Wuxian sighed, wondering how the Lan disciples ever managed on night hunts when they were out in the forests together. Did everyone sleep fully clothed, under separate trees with their hair perfectly coiffed at all times? It was impractical.

In short order, the bath was filled and the two men took their leave. They mentioned that the water for the second bath was still heating but would be brought up as soon as it was ready. As soon as the door closed behind them, Lan Wangji dropped his arm, and walked towards the door.

“Bathe. I will return shortly.”

“Lan Zhan. Don’t go out in the rain just because of me! If it bothered you so much, you should have just let me wait for the other room! I promise I’ll stay behind the privacy screen the entire time to not harm your delicate sensibilities by seeing me with my clothes off.”

Lan Wangji did not reply, nor did he look at Wei Wuxian. All Wei Wuxian could see was the redness of the man’s ears as he walked out of the room, closing it firmly behind him.

Wei Wuxian didn’t understand why he had insisted that they share a room if it bothered Lan Wangji so much to be in the same room with him as he changed and bathed. He also realized that he had forgotten to ask the workers if they could send up a dry robe for Wei Wuxian to use while his clothes dried, but he’d been too distracted by Lan Wangji’s prudish behavior.

“Well, I’ll just ask them when they bring up Lan Zhan’s bath water,” Wei Wuxian mumbled to himself, feeling his stomach rumble in hunger. He stripped off the rest of his clothes, carefully arranging them as close to the brazier as he could without scorching them.

He’d have to ask for a second brazier to be brought up for Lan Wangji’s clothes as well. He wondered if Lan Wangji carried a spare set with him. It would make sense, because every time Wei Wuxian saw him, his robes were always utterly pristine. Surely even the inestimable Hanguang Jun could not go days of night hunting without even a smudge of dirt. Perhaps he had a special pouch that contained endless supplies of white robes.

He submerged himself in the hot water, sighing blissfully as he sunk low into the tub, letting the water close over his head. The warmth seeped into his chilled flesh. He was still unused to such luxuries after his time in the Burial Mounds. His body had forgotten what it was like to actually receive care.

Both his mind and his body had been reforged during that time. Made harder. But also more brittle. Wei Wuxian used the small cloth to wash himself.

Sometimes, he felt like a stranger in his own skin. In his own mind.

He had tried to keep himself from thinking too much about what it was going to be like to return to the Burial Mounds after having only recently escaped. It wasn’t that he was afraid of being trapped again. He knew he wouldn’t. He’d learned to speak with the energy that powered the Burial Mounds, and it was no longer a threat to him.

But still, somehow the thought of just being *there* again. Feeling the darkness pressing around him. Hear the whispers speaking and not knowing if they were in his head or surrounding him…

He felt the water growing cool, and was suddenly very grateful that Lan Wangji had insisted on sharing a room. He did not want to be alone when nightfall came and his memories pressed in around him. He had not slept much since he’d returned from the Burial Mounds, but - when he had - it hadn’t been restful.

He was surprised that the servants had not returned with Lan Wangji’s bath water, nor the food. Wei Wuxian stood, drying himself with the towels that had been left for him. He kept one around his shoulders as his hair would take some time to dry. With no dry clothes to change

into, he pulled the coverlet off one of the beds and wrapped it around himself to at least be somewhat covered when they arrived.

Whatever Lan Wangji might think, Wei Wuxian did have *some* shame.

While he waited, he sat on the bed and began to comb through his hair to help it dry. His hair liked to tangle even under the best of circumstances, but between the wind, the rain and the bath, it was going to take some time to work all the knots out.

He was only about a quarter of the way finished when the door to the room opened, and Lan Wangji returned.

“Lan Zhan! Where have you been?”

Lan Wangji answered by picking up the privacy screen and placing it in front of Wei Wuxian’s bed just as several servants entered carrying buckets of steaming water, as well as a large tray of food.

Wei Wuxian heard the sounds of the bath water being changed, and then the door closing.

“Lan Zhan?” Wei Wuxian asked, not quite feeling like getting up off the soft bed and walking across the cold floor to see what Lan Wangji was doing.

“Wei Ying. I have a change of clothes for you. Dress, and come eat.”

A pile of carefully folded black and red robes was placed at the side of the privacy screen. Wei Wuxian stared at the pile for a moment.

“Lan Zhan. Did you just… walk out into the rain to buy me some dry robes? I could have waited for the ones I had to dry!” Wei Wuxian felt oddly distressed at the thought of Lan Wangji going through all the trouble for him. Even if Lan Wangji’s body wasn’t clogged up with yin energy that blocked his golden core from helping him regulate his temperature properly, it couldn’t be pleasant.

“It was no problem. Shops were still open. Wei Ying was cold.”

“Did you at least buy dry robes for yourself as well?” Wei Wuxian asked, feeling upset as he got up from the bed and stalked around the privacy screen to find Lan Wangji standing rigidly, looking at the tub where the water was once again steaming.

“Lan Zhan! You can’t just do things like this! What if you get sick?”

“Will not get sick.” Lan Wangji turned very briefly to look at Wei Wuxian before turning back to look at the tub. “Dress properly. Eat and stay warm.”

Wei Wuxian wanted to continue arguing, but he realized that Lan Wangji was waiting for him to finish changing so he could move the privacy screen back near the tub so he could bathe while the water was still hot. He was also increasingly suspicious that Lan Wangji had managed to talk to Wen Qing before he’d left Cloud Recesses.

“Fine. I’ll change. But you can’t just keep running around buying clothes for everyone who gets wet.”

“Mn,” Lan Wangji said, still not looking at him.

“Is this because of what Wen Qing said?” Wei Wuxian asked as he picked up the robes, noticing the weave was much higher quality than the ones they were replacing, which seemed silly considering tomorrow they were about to raise a thousand corpses and lead them into battle. But Lan Wangji had been wearing a white lace outer-robe when he’d fought the slaughter tortoise, so evidently this was just something that the Lan sect did.

“Wen Qing?” Lan Wangji sharply.

“Ah, nevermind.” Wei Wuxian dressed quickly, but he would be lying if he said that the soft, dry robes didn’t feel significantly better against his skin than the rough coverlet had been.

“Thank you,” Wei Wuxian said as he stepped out from behind the privacy screen. He picked it up and placed it next to the steaming tub.

“What did Wen Qing say?” Lan Wangji asked, his face taking on the stubborn expression that usually meant he was going to be a royal pain in Wei Wuxian’s ass about something.

“Nope. Not until you’re in your bath. You already went back out in the cold. It’s your turn. Do you at least have dry robes for yourself?”

Lan Wangji eyed him for a moment, and Wei Wuxian glared at him. Lan Wangji was not the only one who could be stubborn. After a moment, Lan Wangji nodded, his eyes inspecting the robes as though verifying that Wei Wuxian had not foolishly put on his wet ones just to be disobedient.

“Eat,” Lan Wangji said, gesturing towards the tray of food that had been brought. Some of the dishes were a deep red, and Wei Wuxian was fairly sure that Lan Wangji had been the one to let the innkeeper know which dishes to make.

“What about you? The food will be cold by the time you finish your bath. You should have let them bring a second tub so we could have bathed at the same time.”

“It’s fine. You eat, and I will join you.”

“I can wait -,” Wei Wuxian cut off at the glare that Lan Wangji sent him. “Ok, fine! Ugh, you’re being such a mother hen today, Lan Zhan. But fine. I’m nicely washed and dressed in the clothes you bought and I will eat the food you had prepared. Ok?”

Lan Wangji looked at him for a moment, an oddly intense expression in his eyes.

“Mn,” Lan Wangji said before turning and stepping behind the privacy screen. “And you will tell me what Wen Qing said about why your golden core is not keeping you as warm as it should be.”

Wei Wuxian could hear the soft rustle of cloth, then saw Lan Wangji’s robes begin to appear layer by layer on the hook at the edge of the privacy screen. He wondered why Lan Wangji

thought it was fine for him to bathe in the same room as Wei Wuxian, but not the other way around.

Whatever Lan Wangji's rationale was, Wei Wuxian was grateful to have another living body in the room with him. His thoughts had been veering into darker places as they had approached the Burial Mounds. Lan Wangji's presence in the room was like an oak tree. Steady and strong, and deeply rooted.

He ate the dishes that had been clearly made for him, leaving their paler counterparts for Lan Wangji. Since Lan Wangji was not eating with him, Wei Wuxian talked with him about what Wen Qing had said about needing to keep his golden core fully replenished if he was going to switch from Yin cultivation to Yang. He glossed over some of the more dire elements of what Wen Qing had told him (like how he could completely destroy his golden core it he had too much Yin energy and not enough Yang energy to counter the spiritual pressure), but the heavy silence from behind the privacy screen told him that Lan Wangji had probably filled in the gaps, anyway.

Lan Wangji emerged from his bath, dressed in pristine, dry robes and his hair somehow already perfectly smooth, if damp. Wei Wuxian kept him company while Lan Wangji meticulously ate his meal. In the past, he would have tried to get a reaction out of Lan Wangji by chattering at him or trying to find shocking statements to get a reaction out of him, but he didn't have the energy.

Actually, that wasn't quite right. It wasn't that he didn't have the energy, it was more that he wanted to preserve the calm that Lan Wangji exuded rather than disrupt it. He wanted to take Lan Wangji's calm aura and wrap himself in it like a blanket. He didn't know when he would feel it again, if Lan Wangji would ever be this calm and at ease in his presence again, so he was soaking up every last second of it while he had it.

So instead of talking, Wei Wuxian resumed the work he'd started on detangling his hair while his friend ate. His body had definitely not yet recovered its stamina since his ordeal in the Burial Mounds, because he felt his eyes grow heavy and it wasn't even *Lan Wangji's* bedtime yet, much less his own.

"I will do it." Lan Wangji had evidently finished his meal and was now sitting beside Wei Wuxian, taking his own comb and brushing Wei Wuxian's hands out of the way as he began the task of (much more efficiently) detangling Wei Wuxian's hair.

Wei Wuxian could not remember the last time someone had helped him with his hair, but he was sure it was Shijie, back when he was very young. There was something very calming and steadying about the process. Neither of them spoke, which was normal for Lan Wangji but decidedly *not* normal for Wei Wuxian.

He didn't mind, though, and neither did Lan Wangji.

Whatever would happen tomorrow, Wei Wuxian was grateful that Lan Wangji was not leaving him to his own thoughts in the inn. Tonight, he would rest, and make sure his golden core was fully replenished.

Then tomorrow, he would go and raise the dead.

To be continued…

Chapter 21: The war begins

A/N: Thank you again to ZazGeek for betaing this chapter. If you like to visualize the battle tactics, it is helpful to have the rough geography in your head about where everything is. I based the plan off this map: https://modao-zushi.fandom.com/wiki/Map

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They could feel the miasma of the resentful energy of the Burial Mounds before they could see it. For Wei Wuxian, it began as a soft murmuring of voices that he was not sure were inside his head or emanating from the Burial Mounds, but he could feel the strength of it resonating deep in his bones.

Lan Wangji tensed on his sword, shooting Wei Wuxian a concerned look.

"Lan Zhan. Do you feel it?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"Mn," Lan Wangji replied affirmatively.

"What does it feel like to you?" Wei Wuxian asked, curious as to whether all cultivators experienced this… *pull* in the same way he had. Something that explained why Wei Wuxian was the only one to ever survive.

"Feel?" Lan Wangji asked, a tiny frown marring his perfect brow as they slowed their approach and descended to go the rest of the way on foot. The thickness of the Yin energy was increasing, and would soon interfere with them channeling their Yang energy sufficiently to fly on their swords. That was part of the reason that Wen Chao and his goons had thrown Wei Wuxian into the Burial Mounds from such a height rather than approaching any closer.

Of course, the main reason was that Wen Chao was a cowardly piece of shit, but that had never been a point up for debate. And in any case, Wei Wuxian had already dealt with him.

"Can you hear the voices?" Wei Wuxian asked.

Lan Wangji's head snapped to face Wei Wuxian. "You hear their voices?"

Well, that answered that question. Wei Wuxian briefly considered lying, but there was no point in it. Lan Wangji wasn't an idiot. "Yeah."

Lan Wangji stopped walking, his face pale as he looked towards the heart of the Burial Mounds. The trees and grass were dead. The late morning sun, which had shone brightly on them since they left the inn that morning, was shrouded with a dark haze that intensified in the direction of the Burial Mounds. Even where they stood, at the perimeter, the spiritual pressure of the Yin energy was curling around them, pushing against them. It made channeling Yang energy feel like wading through mud. Even the air felt harder to breathe, as though an invisible hand was slowly closing over their lungs, restricting their motion. It was still slight, but Wei Wuxian knew from experience it would increase as they walked further in.

"How did you do it?" Lan Wangji asked, his voice low and tight, his eyes fixed straight ahead.

“Do what?” Wei Wuxian asked, frowning.

“Survive.”

Wei Wuxian didn’t answer, because he honestly didn’t know.

Wei Wuxian could see tiny beads of sweat forming on Lan Wangji’s brow as he tried to keep the Yin energy from penetrating his spiritual pathways. Lan Wangji had to keep his pathways clear, or his cultivation power would be at risk. Wei Wuxian didn’t bother putting up any sort of fight, as he would shortly be drawing in every drop of Yin energy his body could hold.

The limited amount of hazy sunlight that was still able to reach them on the outskirts of the Burial Mounds seemed to be drawn to the pristine white of Lan Wangji’s robes. Compared to the dark desolation that surrounded them, he seemed almost to glow. He looked so pure in contrast with the Burial Mounds that Wei Wuxian felt his heart clench.

Lan Wangji was not meant for this place. He should not be sullied by the kinds of things that had taken root deep within Wei Wuxian. Things that burrowed down within and did not let go.

“Lan Zhan. Go back,” Wei Wuxian said.

Lan Wangji’s eyes snapped to Wei Wuxian’s, and his hand tightened around *Bichen* . “Will stay with Wei Ying.”

Wei Wuxian sighed, though he was entirely unsurprised by Lan Wangji’s response. The man was known for never turning away from danger, going wherever the chaos was. He wasn’t likely to start running away now with the entire cultivation world on the line. But that was a blade that could slice both ways.

“Lan Zhan. The spiritual pressure of the Yin energy will only increase as we move deeper inside. If it enters your spiritual pathways at all, they can become inflamed and constricted. One of us needs to still be able to fly in case something goes wrong, and that’s not going to be me in about twenty minutes. Even here, the Yin energy is strong. You can feel it, right? Pressing against you?”

Lan Wangji turned and stared intently towards the center of the Burial Mounds for several moments, his jaw clenched. Finally he turned back to look at Wei Wuxian, his golden eyes fierce and conflicted.

Wei Wuxian recognized the look. It was the same expression that he was sure had been on his own face when he’d had to leave Lotus Pier to go to the Unclean Realm, despite the enemies at their doorstep. It was not a feeling he wished upon his friend.

“Look. It will be ok. You don’t need to go far. Just far enough that the Yin energy doesn’t affect you. You wouldn't be able to go much further with me, anyway.”

Lan Wangji looked at him for another extended moment.

“Wei Ying will not take unnecessary risks,” Lan Wangji said sternly.

Wei Wuxian didn't really know what could qualify as an *unnecessary* risk considering he was about to enter a place that only one person had ever survived (but at least that person was himself, so he supposed that counted for something).

Lan Wangji apparently did not like Wei Wuxian's hesitation, because he spoke again, his voice tense. "I am not sure that I will be able to come in after you if something goes wrong. Wei Ying must be careful. Wei Ying must *come back.* "

The stiff posture of Lan Wangji's body and clenched jaw indicated just how difficult that admission was for him.

Wei Wuxian felt a soft smile form on his lips.

"Lan Zhan. I know my way around here. I'll be fine."

Lan Wangji's expression did not ease. "You will not be fine. But I will help you. Just come back."

Wei Wuxian held his gaze for a moment longer, then turned and walked to the heart of the Burial Mounds. He could feel Lan Wangji's gaze on his back the entire time.

The oppressive weight of the Burial Mounds pressed all around him as Wei Wuxian walked towards the deepest part. The familiarity of the place was not comforting, but at least it didn't elicit the absolute terror it had during his first entry into the cursed place.

The darkness swirled around him.

Flowed into him.

Consumed him.

But unlike the first time, he knew what to expect. He no longer had the panic of uncertainty bubbling inside him. He could survive this. He *had* survived this. The voices murmured around and within him, acknowledging his presence and that he had kept his word and returned to the Burial Mounds to give them vengeance.

It had taken him months when he'd first entered to be able to fully hear each voice, to track it and link with it. And finally to channel his desires to them, and bend them to his will. This time, he would have only a few hours. But he knew what they wanted now. He had learned their stories and shared his own. But still, there was a risk of taking so much of them inside him.

They were much more powerful than any single cultivator was. He knew not to try to control them outright. Instead, he needed to open himself up and help them to get what they wanted. Guide, not grab.

Wei Wuxian brough *Chenqing* to his lips and began to play.

Slowly around him, the Burial Mounds began to stir.

Wei Wuxian's eyes began to glow with a reddish light as he opened his spiritual pathways and his mind to the darkness that lived there.

The bones of the dead re-knit themselves with the resentful energy that surrounded them. Wei Wuxian tracked each spirit, each filament of resentful energy. His mind filled with a thousand stories of pain and fear and suffering, threatening to shatter his own psyche into a thousand splinters. But he did not stop.

He called the dead to march with him against their tormentors. His enemies.

If his concentration broke, so would his control on the corpses, and he had no idea what would happen then. The pressure on his mind built and built and built, his brain having to keep track of each corpse, each spirit, to coax them to do his bidding. The seal in his pouch hummed and vibrated with the resentful energy that was pouring into it and building around him. It might be more powerful in helping him control the spirits if he could hold it to his skin, but he needed both hands to play his flute. Even just carried on his person, he could feel the power the seal channeled.

Everything else faded from his thoughts as he used every ounce of focus on his task.

He was not sure if he was breathing, except he could still hear the sound of his flute, so he must be. He could feel the moment his mind locked in sync with the full power of the Burial Mounds.

Power.

So much fucking *power.*

More than any cultivator could ever dream to possess on their own.

More than any army they could wield against him.

Wei Wuxian felt a flicker of something even darker spark to life in his mind, the tendrils of it wrapping around his thoughts like the roots of the dead trees that surrounded him. It pulled at his mind, shaping new thoughts that had not been there before.

The Wen had abused their power for so long. They weren't the only ones, though. How many of those in power truly deserved it? How many were honestly any better than Wen Ruohan and his sons?

Maybe it was time for balance to be reversed. Let them feel what it was like to have the heel of someone's boot pressing down against their throat.

The degree of hatred in the thought was foreign to Wei Wuxian, and the viceralness of it sent a jolt of fear through him.

The *belief* felt real. It felt solid.

But he knew it wasn't his own. It was a fetid remnant of the anguish of the souls who had perished here, unavenged. And it would consume him if he wasn't careful. This was the risk Wei Wuxian had known he would have to face. If his mind wasn't strong enough, his will was

not firm enough, he would lose himself to the vengeful spirits he was channeling. If he lost control, the vengeance of the corpses he was summoning would be indiscriminate.

Wei Wuxian needed to find an anchor, something to tether his consciousness to. A hard line that he would not cross. A person he would never hurt.

Lan Zhan.

The image of him sent a wave of calm through Wei Wuxian's panicked psyche. Lan Zhan was pure. Lan Zhan was good. He did not deserve to die by Wei Wuxian's hands. He used the image of Lan Wangji, the pure white of his robes and his sword to focus his control. He would keep his army from killing indiscriminately.

He *would* .

Wei Wuxian turned, continuing to play, and began leading his army out of the Burial Mounds, towards Qingjie.

Towards Lan Zhan.

Wei Wuxian hoped the man was still waiting for him at the edge of the Burial Mounds. And he hoped he wouldn't turn away when he saw what Wei Wuxian had become.

Wei Wuxian had the same sense of emerging from the depths of a dark lake as he walked his army out of the Burial Mounds for the second time in his life.

Only this time, as he broke through the surface of the thick shroud of Yin energy, he was not alone.

A figure clad in glowing white, haloed in an aura of pure yang energy, was waiting for him at the edges.

Lan Wangji lifted his gaze to meet Wei Wuxian's, and Wei Wuxian felt his breath still.

He *needed* Lan Wangji to stay with him during this battle, to be his anchor point. There was no one else. Shijie was not here, and would not have the strength to stop him if he needed to be stopped. Wei Wuxian needs someone to be able to bring him back if he crosses a line that should not be crossed. He needs to have a reason, a person, who he knows beyond any doubt is truly good. Who is above all the greed, avarice and lust for power that pervades the rest of the cultivation world.

Lan Wangji's face paled and his lips parted slightly in shock as his golden eyes locked with Wei Wuxian's glowing red ones. Wei Wuxian forced himself to not look away. If Lan Wangji would condemn him for this, he would accept that condemnation unflinchingly.

Wei Wuxian paused in his stride, not coming any closer as he allowed Lan Wangji time to process what he was seeing. Lan Wangji's gaze held his for several suspended moments before it drifted to the nearly endless sea of corpses that were following Wei Wuxian.

Lan Wangji assessed the nature of the army that Wei Wuxian had summoned. There was no mistaking it for anything other than what it was.

“Wei Ying.” Lan Wangji’s voice was low and tight. But it did not sound like fear. It sounded like… worry? “Are you alright? Can you hold it all?”

Wei Wuxian had expected condemnation.

What he got was worry.

He’s only worried about your ability to control us. He doesn’t care about you.

Wei Wuxian felt self-doubt and self-loathing surge through him. He had made so many mistakes in his past. Tried so many things that failed. If he failed to control this army, it wouldn’t be only himself that paid the price. Images of his sister, the junior disciples, and A-Yuan flashed through his mind. If he lost control, he could kill them all.

Lan Wangji was right not to trust him. He only came because he knew Wei Wuxian would fail and Lan Wangji was the only one with any hope of stopping him. He felt himself drowning in his rapidly darkening thoughts until the memory from the night before at the inn resurfaced.

Lan Wangji ordering spicy food so that Wei Wuxian would eat.

Lan Wangji insisting Wei Wuxian take the first bath, despite both of them being chilled.

Lan Wangji going out in the rain again just so he would have dry clothes.

Lan Wangji combing Wei Wuxian’s hair when he was too tired to do it himself.

None of those actions spoke of suspicion or monitoring. Lan Wangji might be worried that Wei Wuxian would lose control of the army. In fact, he *should* be worried about it. Wei Wuxian was also worried.

The thought took some weight off his shoulders. Yes, Lan Wangji would be watching him. But that was a good thing. Wei Wuxian trusted Lan Wangji, and that was not something he gave out lightly. Shijie was probably the only other person whose judgement Wei Wuxian would place above his own. If Lan Wangji or Shijie told him to stop, Wei Wuxian would stop. No matter how far gone he might be, no matter what the voices in his head were telling him, he would never hurt Lan Zhan or Shijie.

Shijie was hopefully going to be nowhere near the battle, but Lan Wangji would be beside him. If he began to lose control, Lan Wangji would not cower in fear. He would find a way to stop Wei Wuxian. If it came down to it, Wei Wuxian could accept dying by Lan Wangji’s hand if it had to be done.

Wei Wuxian stopped playing for a moment, feeling only a slight loosening of his control on his army. They were currently aligned in purpose, and didn’t need much more direction at the moment.

“Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian said quietly. “If my control slips, you need to stop me.”

They both knew there would be only one way of accomplishing that.

Lan Wangji's lips tensed, his eyes burning, but he gave a short nod. "Do not lose control, Wei Ying."

Before Wei Wuxian could reply, a butterfly approached him, clearly having been waiting for him to emerge from the Burial Mounds. He recognized it as one of the new messenger butterflies he'd left for his *Shijie* , and his heart froze.

"A-Xian. A-Cheng and I got your message. Jin Zixuan is here and we are leading the townspeople and the junior disciples to follow behind you. A-Cheng will come when he can. Be safe. "

His shijie's voice came clearly from the messenger talisman. Wei Wuxian could hear the tenseness in her voice, but she did not sound hurt or panicked, which was a good sign. The butterfly glowed, then went out. She hadn't mentioned any help from GusuLan, but they had further to go, needing to circle around to the south to avoid the Wen troops that were surrounding Lotus Pier. Shijie had not activated the tracking portion, but Wei Wuxian supposed that she knew him well enough that he would have turned the army around to find her if she had. Lotus Pier was not very far from the Burial Mounds. If she got out before the attack, there were only three Wen camps between her and Wei Wuxian, and only one of them was large.

He might not have thought very highly of Jin Zixuan in the past, but if the peacock had gone against his father to come to Lotus Pier and help get Shijie to safety, then Wei Wuxian was willing to reconsider his opinion. And if Jin Zixuan was there to pretend to help but actually was doing his father's bidding in further weakening Lotus Pier and putting Shijie in danger, then Wei Wuxian would run him through with his sword.

But if his sister was coming this way looking for a safe passage, then Wei Wuxian needed to get his army moving and clear a path for her. He couldn't lead his army into YunmengJiang land without risking Madam Yu dividing her forces to fight both the Wen and Wei Wuxian, but he could go as close as possible and draw out any Wen camps that were near the border. He might not be able to save the buildings of Lotus Pier, but he would save as many lives as he could.

Jiang Cheng better not be an idiot and get himself killed, or Wei Wuxian would raise him as a fierce corpse and kill him all over again.

Wei Wuxian had memorized the locations of the Wen camps. He began to play and directed his army to follow. Lan Wangji watched for a moment, then jumped gracefully onto his sword.

"I will scout to see if their location has changed, and signs of the YunmengJiang refugees." Lan Wangji knew exactly what needed to be done.

Wei Wuxian nodded in gratitude. He would not be able to fly any time soon, and a birds' eye view was much better than the view from the ground in terms of scouting.

Lan Wangji did not bother to hide his ascent from any possible surrounding spies. The thunder of a thousand undead soldiers walking would soon be heard across the cultivation world.

Wei Wuxian was growing increasingly suspicious that Lan Wangji was trying to prevent Wei Wuxian from getting to use much of his army at all. The first camp they had taken out between their position and Lotus Pier was small and had been taken completely by surprise. Still, that was no excuse for Lan Wangji to have completely decimated it before Wei Wuxian and his army could even reach it.

The next camp was larger, and they had fought together, Lan Wangji's blade flowing in smooth, deadly arcs as it cut down anyone who tried to attack Wei Wuxian as he played *Chenqing*. The second camp had been equally unprepared, however, and the battle was over relatively quickly. They had purposely allowed two messengers to escape, headed towards the largest of the Wen camps that was between them and Lotus Pier.

Rather than following the messengers to the camp, Wei Wuxian led his army north along the western border of YunmengJiang lands. He needed to draw the Wen forces up away from Lotus Pier, while also posing enough of a threat to the Wen armies to the north that were preparing to attack the Unclean Realm.

With every skirmish, Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji allowed one or two survivors to escape, allowing them to alert the other Wen forces of their location and direction. Twice, Wei Wuxian had to pause in his playing to spit out the dark blood that had pooled in his stomach as the resentful energy collected within him. Each time, he could feel Lan Wangji's eyes on him, but there was nothing to be done.

By the second day of fighting, they could see smoke rising in the distance, in the general direction of Lotus Pier. It made Wei Wuxian's stomach twist, and he briefly fell to his knees, heaving as he expelled more tainted blood. With his Yang energy cut off, he could feel his physical strength waning. He hoped the Wen attacked them soon, before he was too weak to control the corpses.

There was no time for sleep. No time for food. Normally, for a cultivator of his caliber, it would not be an issue. But that assumed that he still had access to his golden core. Without being able to draw on it, he was like any non-cultivator would be after nearly two days with no food and no sleep.

On top of that, there had been no further communication from his sister, and no sign of refugees despite Wei Wuxian's army sitting on the very border (and perhaps a tiny bit across the border) of Yunmeng territory. Both his strength and his concentration were flagging.

It was at the end of their second day of fighting when the counter-attack finally came. The news of their army's strategy of picking off individual groups of soldiers had finally reached someone in control, and the camps had all moved. Lan Wangji had been scouting to find their next target, when he quickly returned.

"There is an army of cultivators coming," he told Wei Wuxian, his voice holding not an ounce of fear. "It is quite large."

Meng Yao's plan was working. Wen Ruohan would have heard the rumors of a large army, but assume it would be easily crushed by his massive forces.

His arrogance would be what brought him down.

The plan was for Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji to continue to push north, drawing the Wen forces from Yunmeng and Qinghe. Nie Mingjue would wait (if Nie Huaisang could control him) until the Wen forces surrounding the Unclean Realm had turned to face the threat from the south. Then the Nie would attack from the North, with the Lan They had been focusing all of their attention to the East, and were therefore surprised when a voice called out from their southern flank.

"A-Xian!" Jiang Yanli's voice was full of a tension that he had never heard before. A coiled mix of fear, relief, worry, and shock.

Wei Wuxian turned to find his sister, flanked by nearly all of the YunmengJiang junior disciples, and a few gold-robed cultivators. Wei Wuxian recognized the one closest to her instantly as Jin Zixuan. Further behind them was a huge mass of civilians, though they were far enough away that Wei Wuxian could not make out their faces.

This was probably for the best, for the majority of the faces turned towards him were filled with shock and terror.

Wei Wuxian looked into her sister's face. Like Lan Wangji's, her face showed no disgust. Only shock and worry.

"A-Xian!" Jiang Yanli called again, taking a step towards Wei Wuxian before Jin Zixuan grabbed her arm and held her back.

Wei Wuxian might not like the man's hands on his sister, but keeping her out of the battle zone was something he could agree with him on.

"Shijie! Stay back. We're about to be attacked." Panic flooded him with energy that he hadn't felt in over a day. He had to keep his sister safe. He could see her struggle against Jin Zixuan, and thought quickly of what to say to keep her back and out of harm's way. He scanned the crowd for any sign of Jiang Cheng, but the fact that he wasn't by Shijie's side meant he likely hadn't left Lotus Pier. Wei Wuxian tried hard not to think about what that might mean. Jiang Cheng would never forgive him if he let something happen to their sister, and rightly so.

But Jiang Yanli had not left her parents and her brother out of cowardice. She had left Lotus Pier to bring her people to safety when those who *should* have done so were too blinded by stubbornness and pride. His sister might not be strong in terms of cultivation, but she was strong in principle and had no hesitation in putting herself at risk to save her people. Wei Wuxian would draw upon that fact now. The people she needed to save were the ones she had led out of Lotus Pier, not the corrupted cultivator leading the army of undead into battle.

"Shijie. You have to lead the juniors and the civilians to safety. Stay with the Peacock." Jin Zixuan looked about as surprised as Wei Wuxian felt at his own words, but there really wasn't time to come up with a better option.

Wei Wuxian turned to Lan Wangji. "Lan Zhan. You have to get them to safety. Take them in the opposite direction of the battle. Find the cultivators that your brother sent, and get them the fuck out of here."

Lan Wangji did not look happy, but he apparently agreed that having Wei Wuxian's sister with a bunch of children and civilians on the battlefield was not a good idea.

"I will not be long." Lan Wangji flew over to Jin Zixuan, and the two began directing the others in the opposite direction from where Lan Wangji had said the consolidated force was coming from. He thought he recognized one of the other Jin cultivators as MianMian, but before he could spend any more time thinking about it, he felt his control on the corpses begin to lose direction due to his distraction. He quickly began to play before he lost the link entirely. He looked back one more time to see his sister looking at him in anguish as she was led away with the others.

He closed his eyes, locking the image of his sister in his mind as he picked up the fraying threads of the link to his corpse army, and led them to where the Wen army was waiting for him.

To be continued…

A/N - So in the next chapter, we will find out who survived Lotus Pier. And also what the other sect's reaction is to Wei Wuxian and his army.

But Jiang Yanli made it out, so that is at least one major death avoided, along with all the babies. I am hoping to post a oneshot for Valentine's day, since the romance in this fic (at least the smut part) is taking FOREVER to get to but we'll see how it goes. Happy Lunar New year!

Chapter 22: The unseen arrow

A/N: Ok, I'm not going to lie. This chapter ends on a terrible cliff-hanger. But I promise that I will not be late with the next chapter. And what battle is complete without suspense? You can come scream at me on Twitter @KizuKatana if it will make you feel better. I probably deserve it.

Thank you to everyone who has been leaving me comments and kudos… I appreciate it so much! And thanks to ZazGeek for continuing to beta my chapters.

As much as Wei Wuxian wanted to stay by his sister's side and keep her safe, he knew that the best way to protect her was to keep the battle as far away from her as possible. To do that, he needed to draw as many of the Wen soldiers out of Yunmeng territory as he could, and clear a path for the refugees behind him. He trusted Lan Wangji to keep her and the rest of the Yunmeng refugees safe… and to run Jin Zixuan through if the peacock was there under his father's orders rather than to help protect Shijie.

Wei Wuxian had a job to do, and in order to do it, he needed to focus. From what Lan Wangji had said, the Wen army knew his position and was headed directly towards him. Wen Ruohan never entered a battle that he didn't think he could win, so if they were coming for him, they would be coming *en masse* . He thought about his current position, which wasn't very far from a medium sized village. If he stayed where he was, the village would be turned into a warzone, and the Wen didn't have a good reputation for trying to avoid civilian casualties. Everyone had heard about what had happened to Caiyi Town.

Wei Wuxian decided to move his army further to the north. It would put them on flatter terrain, where the size and brute strength of his army would have the most advantage, as well as avoid any major settlements. He had enough resentful corpses already in his army. He did not need to add more to their ranks.

Wei Wuxian might have the element of surprise in terms of the exact nature of his army, but Wen Ruohan had not risen to power through his military might by being a fool. The battle would not be easy, especially when Wen Ruohan had an army of cultivators who could improvise and think for themselves to plan, adjust, and counter whereas Wei Wuxian's army was fully under his control, with no ability to think for themselves or be his eyes to notice something off that could signal a change in tactic or a trap.

It would be Wei Wuxian's mind against not just Wen Ruohan's mind, but also the minds of the collective Wen army of cultivators and mercenaries.

He stomped down on the frisson of nerves and uncertainty that snaked through him. Wei Wuxian might have self doubts about many elements of himself as a person, but as a cultivator, he knew his strength. He might be barely twenty, but his army would feel no pain, and continue fighting even with limbs missing.

He was willing to place his will and strength of purpose against whatever Wen Ruohan could throw at him

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As Wei Wuxian saw the first mercenary pennant appear on the horizon, he drew a steadying breath and played, shifting his tune into a more intricate, aggressive melody than the one he'd used for basic marching. His army moved forward, no fear within its ranks, completely aligned with Wei Wuxian's mind and directive.

Their progress across the land was not graceful, but it was inexorable.

He could see the expression of dawning horror on his enemies' faces as they realized the nature of the enemy they were facing. Fierce corpses were no strangers to a hardened cultivator, but the sight of a thousand undead marching down on them was completely overwhelming.

Wei Wuxian hoped that the money that Jin Guangshan paid them was worth it.

He kept himself back from the front, knowing that he would not be able to use his sword to defend himself, both because he needed to continue to play *Chenqing* , but also because he could not access his golden core without the risk of destroying it completely. In his hands, currently, *Suibian* was just a piece of sharp metal.

His flute was infinitely more dangerous in his hands.

The air filled with the sound of swords being drawn, cries of surprise and horror as the Wen army took in the true nature of their enemy.

Wei Wuxian played, and his army surged.

The corpses were less skilled, but they were strong and had to be literally hacked to pieces to be taken down. He played from behind the front lines, pouring his will into the notes he drew from *Chenqing*. He guided them forward, encouraging them with the promise that these mercenaries worked for the men who had destroyed their lives and ended them in the Burial Mounds.

Their revenge had started.

Wei Wuxian hoped he'd live long enough to see it finished.

It was one thing to know, intellectually, that Wen Ruohan had hired enough mercenaries to nearly triple this size of his original army. It was quite another to see it coming towards him, wave after wave of mercenaries and Wen soldiers appearing on the open fields spreading out before him.

From the documents that they had found in Wen Chao's camp, and in the mercenary camp that reported to Wen Xu, Wei Wuxian had known he would be outnumbered. It was basic math. He had been confident, though, because even though their numbers were greater than his, Wei Wuxian's soldiers could not die.

After all, they were already dead.

So despite the odds, he had felt ready to face Wen Ruohan's army. But the weight of feeling the focus of his enemy upon him was not something that Wei Wuxian had expected. He was surrounded by his army of corpses, but also alone on the battlefield. Every living person within his sights was his enemy.

And there were thousands of them.

He felt a chill down his back at the thought. At the *feel* of it.

Cultivators commanded spiritual energy that made their presence tangible in a way that ordinary people did not possess. Their desire to kill Wei Wuxian carried on the air like a physical thing. Wei Wuxian wished for a brief moment that Lan Wangji had not gone to escort the refugees, that he had someone fighting beside him to share the weight of it. He immediately brushed off the thought. It was better if he faced the army on his own. The early stages of the battle would be the most dangerous. Wei Wuxian had no idea how his corpse army would stand up to a trained force. If they fell quickly, then it would be best if Lan Wangji was safe somewhere else. And if they stood their ground, then he would have no need for Lan Wangji's sword, anyway.

It was more important that Shijie and the others get to safety. Wei Wuxian was used to fighting on his own in night hunts. This was just at a larger (much, much larger) scale.

Wen Ruohan had positioned a large group of his mercenary forces up front, likely using them as test subjects to determine the nature and strengths of the army that must have seemed to have appeared out of nowhere, like magic, to attack them. Wei Wuxian had no difficulties maintaining his focus as his army fought through the ranks of mercenary soldiers. Several of the cultivators had figured out who was controlling the corpse army, and there were more and more attempts to break through Wei Wuxian's front line of corpses to attack him, but they were all in vain.

Wei Wuxian had no idea how long the fighting had been going on. His entire being was focused on directing the army before him, hoping he could hold out long enough for either the Nie or Lan reinforcements to get to him.

Lan Zhan.

Wei Wuxian knew that Lan Wangji would keep his sister safe.

But after the first wave of mercenaries fell under his army, the corpses began to encounter faces they recognized: those who had killed them, or raped them, or had simply stood by when it happened. The low simmer of resentment that had bubbled constantly in Wei Wuxian's mind through his connection with the corpses began to boil over.

Images flashed through his mind, and he began to lose the ability to tell which were real, and which were memory.

Which were his memories, and which were those of the dead he commanded.

He could feel the resentful energy pool in his stomach, tainting his blood and drawing it in. He felt flecks of it on his lips as he played. Anger surged through him, far beyond what the blood lust of battle would normally bring. It was a corrosive anger that ate away at Wei Wuxian's mind, at his soul, fed by the memories of the army he'd raised.

Why should he stop with just the Wen? Weren't all the sects equally guilty? Did any of them ever try to stop the things that had happened?

Wei Wuxian drew a shuddering breath, his hands aching to draw his sword and meet his enemy with his own blade rather than those of his puppet army.

He could feel his mind slipping.

You are alone.

Everyone has abandoned you, just like they always do. They use you as their weapon, but no one stands beside you.

You fight alone.

No sect.

No family.

No one cares about you.

Wei Wuxian brought his sister's face to his mind, trying to hold on to at least a piece of who he was. It worked for a moment, as he pulled out memory after memory of her caring for him.

But she still left you to fight alone.

"I don't *want* Shijie to fight!" Wei Wuxian shouted, pausing in his playing as he argued with the voices in his head.

The invisible threads that he'd linked himself to each corpse in his army quivered, no longer receiving his instruction but still ensnared by the strength of his original call.

Wei Wuxian rubbed a hand over his face, trying to brush the words away. He couldn't close himself off to the voices. His control over the corpses was empathetic, not directive. It required him to keep the link open. He blinked his eyes, trying to focus his mind on the battle at hand.

Lack of food and sleep made it harder to ignore the constant flood of images, memories, and whispering voices in his head. Twice, he was almost too late in redirecting a group of corpses to block a group of cultivators trying to break through to him.

Word had spread, and everyone had clearly been given the order that the main target was the man in black robes playing the dizi. With his golden core accessible, it would take a very serious injury to take Wei Wuxian out. But he wasn't sure what would happen to him now. His core was not drained, but he could not access it to help speed his healing or at least slow the blood flow if he were wounded.

He had to be on guard. If he let himself be taken down before the battle was over, the rest of the sects would fall.

But would that be so bad? The cultivation world abandoned you. Your parents died because of them. You are alone. They only want you when you're useful.

When the battle is over, they will turn on you.

Wei Wuxian felt his legs begin to tremble. The sun had long since set, and risen again. He wasn't sure if it had been only once, or if days had gone by. Time seemed fluid, and reality uncertain.

Surely someone should have reached him by then.

If they were coming. But why would they come? They can sit back and let you fight their battle for them. Then condemn you for doing so.

Wei Wuxian felt the moment he went under. It was like a cord in his mind had snapped, and suddenly he was in freefall. He continued to play *Chenqing* but he no longer was in control. The army would fight who it wanted. He would not stop it. Why should he? They would keep him safe. They would stay with him, when everyone else abandoned him.

The sound of his flute was wild and desperate to his own ears. Brutal and lonely, the despairing notes of *Chenqing* tore at his ears. At his mind.

"Wei Ying."

Wei Wuxian at first thought the voice was just another of the voices in his head, calling out to him.

But the next time he heard it, it was accompanied by a large, warm hand falling on his shoulder.

"Wei Ying. I am here."

Wei Wuxian turned, his breath stilling in his lungs, the shrill sound of *Chenqing* cutting off abruptly, as if severed. Lan Wangji's eyes were intent, full of a level of concern that Wei Wuxian had not expected. But the Lan trained in musical cultivation beyond all other sects. Lan Wangji had heard Wei Wuxian's melody, and known what it meant.

"Lan Zhan?" Wei Wuxian asked, closing his eyes and soaking in the steadiness of Lan Wangji's presence.

"I was delayed. There was a group of Wen soldiers who had circled around from the south. They have been dispatched. Your sister is safe. Wei Ying has done well."

Wei Wuxian blinked against the burning in his eyes, his breath coming rapidly. There were tiny streaks of blood on the sleeves of Lan Wangji's robes, though the rest of his clothing still looked untouched by the journey and battle he had clearly fought.

Without warning, Wei Wuxian's legs lost their strength and he dropped to one knee, the black blood that had been pooling in his stomach forcing its way out as he spat it onto the ground, staining it dark.

Lan Wangji was kneeling by his side in an instant, supporting Wei Wuxian as his stomach heaved again, expelling at least some of the resentment that had been consuming him.

"You came back," Wei Wuxian managed after a moment.

Lan Zhan's face showed the tiny line between his brows that indicated concern or displeasure.

"I promised Wei Ying. I will not leave again."

Wei Wuxian could not reply. He looked at Lan Wangji for a moment more, feeling his mind settle into… if not a *stable* holding pattern, at least not freefall.

His mind was still connected to his army, and he could feel their focus drifting without his direction. They were still fighting, but not in the coordinated way he had been guiding them before. Wei Wuxian was exhausted, and… something much worse than exhausted but there was no time to rest and heal.

He nodded to Lan Wangji, then rose to his feet with Lan Wangji's hand still supporting him. He began to play again, the music less wild and desperate than it had been only moments before.

Lan Wangji did not ask him if he was ok. Wei Wuxian was obviously *not* ok, but they both knew there was no time to rest. Lan Wangji moved forward, placing his body between Wei Wuxian and the Wen army, moving in amongst the corpses to fight with Wei Wuxian.

He was no longer alone on the battlefield.

The battle raged on. Wei Wuxian's army killed many, but lost few.

The corpse soldiers did not need sleep nor food nor rest. They did not feel the pain of their wounds, and they did not feel the draining weight of fear of death in battle that their living enemies felt.

But Wei Wuxian was the one controlling them, and he had less stamina than the cultivators attacking him, because he could not tap into his golden core to sustain him. The abundance of Yin energy that the seal he carried had absorbed had sustained him so far, similar to how the Yin energy had kept him alive without food or water or sunlight for three months in the Burial Mounds. But as much energy as the seal had absorbed, it was not as powerful as total immersion in the Burial Mounds had been, and Wei Wuxian could feel his body weakening.

His limbs trembled with fatigue, and he knew that he would be hard pressed to even lift *Suibian* now, much less strike a killing blow with it.

He felt hunger, and thirst, but there was no time to eat. He had cut through wave after wave of the Wen forces, but each new regiment brought freshly rested soldiers, while Wei Wuxian had no rest.

Through it all, Lan Wangji fought by his side, ensuring that no blade nor arrow nor talisman touched Wei Wuxian.

The Wen army was fully focused on Wei Wuxian now. Their archers were constantly seeking an open line of sight, their cultivators launched attack after attack directed at him, ignoring the corpses even as the corpses cut them down.

Wen Ruohan's command over his forces was truly formidable, to be so willing to die for their army's success. The level of concentration required to keep both his corpses moving where he wanted them while simultaneously watching for a ranged attack attempt against him was exhausting. But whenever Wei Wuxian felt himself start to falter, Lan Wangji was by his side.

By his estimation, they'd taken out well over half of the Wen army. There was still a formidable force to be dealt with, but it was now of a size that the remaining sects would have a chance against if they united. Of course, with the Jin complicit in the Wen assault, and the Jiang incapacitated by sect politics, that left only the Nie and the Lan sects to mount a counter-offensive.

With the Wen forces now coalesced around Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji, it would be the perfect moment to strike. The Wen forces were vulnerable to any sort of flanking attack, as they were rotating the injured and fatigued soldiers from the front lines, and the supply and medical provisions were all in the rear, relatively unprotected.

It was playing out exactly how Nie Huaisang had predicted.

They just had to wait and hope that Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji could hold the front lines long enough for their allies to arrive. Wei Wuxian felt doubts start to creep back in, whether his own or the voices in his mind, he wasn't sure.

His music must have conveyed this, because Lan Wangji turned, not even looking as his sword continued its arc that decapitated his opponent. His once pristine robes now had spatters of blood, though none of it his own.

"Brother will come." Lan Wangji looked cold and calm, absolutely steadfast in his belief that they would win this battle, and the war. He held Wei Wuxian's gaze for a stretched moment, then turned to block an arrow that had been shot from across the field, directed at Wei Wuxian's heart.

They fought on.

Wei Wuxian felt something shift in the battle. There was confusion amongst the Wen forces.

Lan Wangji was the one to spot the source.

"The Nie have arrived from the north." Lan Wangji, finished off the two cultivators he'd been engaged with, leaping on his sword in a fluid motion and soaring up. He effortlessly dodged a hail of arrows, reminding Wei Wuxian of the graceful kites that the smallest of his *shidis* would try and fail to hit during target practice on a windy day. The memory tugged at something soft within him, a loneliness that he tried to avoid letting himself feel.

Lan Wangji returned to Wei Wuxian's side after only a moment.

"Brother is coming from the south. Wen Qing is with him. They will engage in less than an hour."

Wei Wuxian felt relief fill him. He hadn't fully realized how much he had expected to be abandoned by his allies until he found them actually arriving. He was already past his physical limit, and the last several hours the only thing that had kept him standing was knowing that - if he fell - Lan Wangji would die by his side.

Lan Wangji dying was unacceptable on a fundamental level for Wei Wuxian. The thought of his own death had never bothered him overly much, but the world *needed* Lan Wangji in it.

He could see Nie Mingjue, towering over everyone on the battlefield. *Baxia* moved in a lethal arc, cutting down anyone in his path. The strategy of having the weaker, more injured soldiers in the back was proving lethal as the Nie slashed through them with almost no resistance.

Wei Wuxian had not fully realized that - for every cultivator his army had killed, there were many more that had been injured and simply rotated to the rear. Wen Ruohan's army was not just getting smaller due to Wei Wuxian's attacks, but the forces that remained were also weaker. They were injured, tired, and terrified.

Nie Mingjue and his forces were cutting a swath through them with minimal resistance. Wei Wuxian met Red Blade Master's gaze from across the battlefield. There was no trace of disgust on his face. He gave Wei Wuxian a short nod as he beheaded three Wen cultivators with one swipe of his blade.

Wei Wuxian felt something in him relax. Lan Wangji had not turned from him, and it looked like the Nie would not, either. At least, not if the near glee that Nie Mingjue was taking at the panic in the Wen ranks was anything to go by. The Wen had gotten used to thinking of the sects around them as prey that they had sought to encircle and destroy. That 'prey' had now shown up and was taking the Wen out with startling speed and efficiency.

The balance of power on the field had shifted decisively. When the Lan engaged, it would be all over for Wen Ruohan. And if Wen Qing was with Zewu-Jun's forces, then she might be able to help Wei Wuxian purge the Yin energy from his body in a way that wasn't as excruciatingly painful as it had been the last time, when he'd nearly burned his meridians out.

She was likely going to kick his ass for what he'd done, but he'd gladly accept her anger if it meant she would help.

Lan Wangji's hand brushed along Wei Wuxian's back as he felt himself slump a bit in fatigue. It was just a simple touch, with no transfer of spiritual energy. Lan Wangji likely did not have much spiritual energy left, given how long the battle had gone on, and Wei Wuxian was too full of Yin energy to be able to easily accept Yang energy from anyone, anyway. But the touch was somehow still calming, grounding, even if it was nothing more than Lan Wangji's hand against Wei Wuxian's robes.

He paused in his playing, allowing his tired fingers a moment of respite.

"It's almost over," Wei Wuxian said. Even though he spoke the words as though it were a statement, Lan Wangji heard the question embedded within it.

"It is almost over. Wei Ying has fought hard, and will be able to rest soon."

Wei Wuxian gave him a tired smile. The first smile he'd given in what seemed like weeks, but was likely only days.

"And Lan Zhan, too. You also need rest."

It happened so quickly. They had both been so exhausted from the endless vigilance and fighting, and then abruptly so relieved by the arrival of reinforcements and the fact that the battle was going to be over soon that they let their attention slip, for just an instant. Neither saw the

single black arrow that lanced through the sky until it struck, piercing directly into Wei Wuxian's chest.

To be continued…

A/N: So... thoughts? LOL. I promise to get the next chapter up as fast as I possible can!

Chapter 23: Dead Man Walking

A/N - Thank you to everyone who commented on the last chapter. As a writer, nothing is more pleasing than drawing an emotional response from readers so even the enraged comments made me extremely happy. I will finish replying to them all soon, but I felt like I needed to prioritize getting this next chapter up given where I left it last time LOL. Thanks again to ZazGeek for beta'ing this chapter and saving you all from a lot of repetitive language LOL.

It happened so quickly. They had both been so exhausted from the endless vigilance and fighting, and then abruptly so relieved by the arrival of reinforcements and the fact that the battle was going to be over soon that they let their attention slip, for just an instant. Neither saw the single black arrow that lanced through the sky until it struck, piercing directly into Wei Wuxian's chest.

Wei Wuxian looked down at the arrow piercing his chest, the shock of it causing his mind to blank momentarily. Archers had been trying to take him out ever since they'd discovered he was the one controlling the corpses, but Wei Wuxian had kept far enough back that their arrows hadn't been able to hit him. There was only one Wen archer who was good enough to hit a target that far away, and Wei Wuxian knew for a fact that Wen Ning wasn't fighting on the Wen side.

Evidently, one of the archers had gotten lucky.

It had missed his heart, but only barely. Without access to his Golden Core, it was still a mortal wound. It was strange that he couldn't feel it, other than a general awareness that a foreign object was lodged in his chest, piercing his lung.

"Wei Ying!"

Time slowed, and Wei Wuxian looked up at the sound of his name being torn from Lan Wangji's lips.

It seemed as though the entire battlefield had frozen for a single breathless moment, swords held in mid-arc, eyes fixed on Wei Wuxian and the arrow protruding from his chest. Even the corpses seemed to have paused, disjointed in their movements at the abrupt severance of not just Wei Wuxian's playing, but of the link to his mind.

Lan Wangji 's hands gripped Wei Wuxian as though to support him, completely engulfing Wei Wuxian's shoulders. Wei Wuxian realized that he wasn't falling. He wasn't actually doing or feeling anything. It was surreal to be able to see the evidence of his imminent death, but not feel anything about it, physically or emotionally.

"Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian began, but he didn't really know what to say, his mind temporarily disconnected.

Lan Wangji's fingertips glowed blue as he instinctively moved to heal Wei Wuxian.

"Don't," Wei Wuxian grabbed Lan Wangji's wrist, the fog starting to clear as the moment of shock passed and reality set in. He could hear shouting from the battlefield now. Some people

cheering, some people calling his name in concern. He thought he recognized a couple of the voices, one particularly angry shout sounded almost like Jiang Cheng, but that was impossible. He couldn't quite get his brain to connect the dots and fully identify them.

"You can't heal this. You don't have enough spiritual energy left, and I'm still too full of Yin energy to access my own core."

" *Wei Ying* ,' Lan Wangji said, his voice full of anguish and his gaze fixed on the arrow, his fingers digging into Wei Wuxian's shoulders as though he could keep him earthbound by the sheer strength of his grip. Lan Wangji's face held an expression that Wei Wuxian had never seen on him, his eyes blazing with pain, his lips parted on words that could not find their way out.

They both knew that removing the arrow would only make it worse, at best allowing blood to flow out faster, at worst ripping new damage into his body on the arrow's reverse path out of his chest. There was nothing to be done.

"I can't feel it," Wei Wuxian said, his words sounding odd to his own ears. "It doesn't hurt. I…," Wei Wuxian tried to take a breath, but it felt odd - wheezy and shallow - and definitely not as effective as it was supposed to be. "It missed my heart. But got my lung."

"Your lung. But Wei Ying is… healing?" Lan Wangji had started to ask if Wei Wuxian was alright, but that obviously was not the case so he had adjusted his question as he tried to make sense of Wei Wuxian standing seemingly unharmed except for the arrow sticking out of his torso. Lan Wangji's eyes had gone from panicked to more analytical as he examined Wei Wuxian's wound.

The sounds of the battle around them had resumed when it became clear that Wei Wuxian was not dead. The Wen army could sense that the dark-robed cultivator who had decimated their ranks was finally vulnerable, and were fighting with all their might to reach him. The Nie and Lan armies were fighting with all *their* might to ensure that they didn't lose the advantage that Wei Wuxian's corpse army had been providing.

It had been less than a minute since Wei Wuxian had been struck with the arrow, but they were already running out of time to be just standing around. They needed to get back into the battle. Victory was *so close* . They could not lose now.

Wei Wuxian would not let it be his fault if they lost this war, or that more of his allies died when they didn't need to. He had people he wanted to protect.

"No, I can't access my core with all the resentful energy I'm channeling, but -," Wei Wuxian slowly realized what was happening. And more importantly, what would happen when his levels of Yin energy dropped just a little bit more. The sense of urgency to get back into the fight increased ten-fold.

They were running out of time. More accurately, Wei Wuxian was running out of time and he had not yet finished his role in this war. "Ah. Right."

"What?" Lan Wangji asked. Wei Wuxian said nothing for a moment. "Wei Ying, tell me."

Wei Wuxian looked around them, taking in the flow of the fighting that was going on. He could see Nie Mingjue surging towards them from across the battlefield, clearing a path with Baxia,

his face taut with concern. Wei Wuxian slid his hand into the pouch that contained the seal he'd taken from the Slaughter Tortoise. He felt it pulse in his hand, resonating with his own desperation to survive long enough to protect Lan Zhan and everyone else. He needed to keep control of his army. If he died or lost consciousness, he wasn't sure if the corpses would just collapse or if they would start attacking randomly, but he didn't want to find out (or, more accurately, to have Lan Wangji and Nie Mingjue have to find out). He could feel the resentful energy that had soaked into it at the Burial Mounds swirl and coil around his hand, wrapping around his wrist, then his arm, and finally snaking along his torso to wrap around his body.

It was as though it was holding him together, and - perhaps in a sense - it was. He could feel Lan Wangji's eyes on him, but he did not turn to face him as he continued to watch the final stages of the battle that were playing out around them.

The corpses had resumed fighting somewhat, but randomly with whomever was closest or happened to attack them. When it had been only Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji against the Wen army, it wouldn't have mattered. But they had allies on the battlefield now, and he didn't want his army to attack his own reinforcements. Wei Wuxian brought *Chenqing* to his lips, and played a long, clear note, calling his army back to focus. It was much weaker than his playing before, but he was happy he was able to get enough air out to play the flute at all. If they stood around too much longer, more arrows could find them. Several corpses moved closer, blocking any line of sight from the archers. Wei Wuxian wasn't sure if he'd subconsciously asked them to or if they had just decided to do so.

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji said, not even glancing at the battle raging around them, entirely focused on Wei Wuxian.

It was frustrating, because there was nothing Lan Wangji could do about the outcome of Wei Wuxian being mortally wounded. They both needed to keep fighting, while Wei Wuxian was still able to do so. But still, he supposed he owed his friend an answer, given all that Lan Wangji had risked to fight by his side.

"This happened before, when I was in the Burial Mounds. Not being shot with an arrow, but being… very injured."

Lan Wangji's mouth flattened into an unhappy line at his words, but Wei Wuxian continued.

"The Yin energy doesn't heal, but it… preserves. I went three months without food last time, and lived."

Wei Wuxian didn't say that the hunger and weakness from his time in the Burial Mounds still had not left him, so the yin energy was not as perfect at preserving as he made it sound.

He didn't say that the amount of Yin energy in the Burial Mounds was a *lot* more than what he had been able to channel through the seal and with *Chenqing*.

He didn't tell Lan Wangji that, with the arrow piercing his chest, even though it missed his heart, he was not going to survive when the Yin energy levels dropped much further than they already were. Or that his Yin energy levels at that point would still be too high for him to be healed with Yang energy given to him by someone else.

The wound was a fatal one, he just hadn't died from it yet. Like his army, Wei Wuxian was a dead man, walking. Lan Wangji didn't need to know that.

But Wei Wuxian always underestimated Lan Wangji's perceptiveness. Lan Wangji looked at the wound in Wei Wuxian's chest. As an experienced night hunter, he would know the outcome of such a wound if it went untreated. A civilian would already be dead.

The sound of swords clashing nearby broke Wei Wuxian out of his thoughts. They didn't have time for this. The war wouldn't stop just because Wei Wuxian was injured, and there were other lives that could still be saved. Lan Wangji seemed to have the same realization. He made a sound deep in his throat, of frustration and anger and something else, his hands tensing briefly on Wei Wuxian's shoulders before he released his grip and turned towards the battlefield.

He looked in the direction where the Lan forces were now engaging the Wen. Zewu Jun would be there, leading the charge of Lan cultivators. Lan Wangji didn't look long in that direction, his eyes rapidly scanning until he found the line of Wen archers that had been firing at Wei Wuxian throughout the battle. They had been kept back from the line of engagement with Wei Wuxian's corpses, firing volleys over the other Wen soldiers who were fighting hand-to-hand in front of them, protecting them from direct assault.

Lan Wangji's golden eyes filled with such fury that it caught Wei Wuxian by surprise as he surged forward, passing through the line of corpses and cutting a vicious swath through any Wen cultivator foolish enough to get in his way. Wei Wuxian had always known that Lan Wangji was deadly with his sword, but he'd never seen him fight like this. He moved with such lethal, graceful, power. Not a single motion was wasted. Wei Wuxian wondered if Lan Wangji was even taking time to breathe.

Cultivators fell to *Bichen* at almost a faster rate than they were falling to *Baxia* . Wei Wuxian realized that Lan Wangji was making his way towards the line of Wen archers that were positioned towards the rear of the Wen ranks. They had been shooting arrows at Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji for the majority of the battle, but only one had struck.

Wei Wuxian didn't want any of his own corpses to attack Lan Wangji by accident, so he focused on his playing. He didn't have the breath for volume, but his notes were clear and strong enough to carry his intent. He kept the army focused on the red robes of the Wen soldiers. It was an easy visual to send across.

Before Lan Wangji reached their line, one by one the archers began to fall. Wei Wuxian didn't stop his playing, but he squinted into the sun to see what was taking them down. His lips curved into a smile, causing his flute to falter slightly when he saw what was happening. Wen Ning had rushed forward past the lead Lan cultivators, and was now stalking the archers, taking them out one by one. Then Lan Wangji was upon them, and the entire regiment of archers was dead beneath the brutally graceful arc of Lan Wangji's blade within minutes.

Wei Wuxian lost sight of Lan Wangji as the battle continued, his vision starting to blur as he slowly depleted the Yin energy that he had been channeling. He was glad that Lan Wangji had moved to engage in the battle fully. There was no point in continuing to protect a man who was already dead, even if Lan Wangji did not know the full extent of it.

Wei Wuxian began to feel the head of the arrow cutting against his flesh with every breath. The pain was starting to build now, which was not a good sign. Pain could sap a person's strength faster than blood loss, and it made it harder to concentrate.

It also meant that Wei Wuxian was running out of time.

He closed his eyes, focusing on the link he had with his corpse army, directing them to keep fighting. He could hear the sounds of the battle getting closer, the lines of the Wen, Nie, and Lan armies drawing closer together, and nearer to Wei Wuxian's position.

He pulled on the resentful energy around him, trying to draw more of it into himself to sustain his strength. The battle was almost over. Once victory was assured, Wei Wuxian would need to put his army to rest so they wouldn't turn on his allies. There wasn't nearly as much resentful energy here as there had been in the Burial Mounds, despite the number of deaths. The dead here were all soldiers, people who had signed up for a war and aware of the risks. They weren't betrayed or murdered, or innocents caught up in others' machinations. As long as their corpses were properly laid to rest, there would be no significant stain on the soil on which they'd fought and died.

"Are you even *trying* to avoid dying?" A terse female voice came from just beside him, and Wei Wuxian's eyes snapped open.

Wen Qing stood beside him, her eyes narrowed at the where the arrow was protruding from his chest. Wei Wuxian didn't bother to stop playing. She was experienced enough to know exactly what she was seeing.

"You're lucky it missed your heart or there wouldn't be anything I could do," she snapped out, finally raising her eyes to meet his. "If you keep drawing more resentful energy into you, you're going to make it harder for me to heal you."

The sounds of battle were starting to decrease. The Wen army was in ruins. Whatever remaining pockets of their forces were still standing would easily be taken out by Nie Mingjue and his army. Or even just Nie Mingjue on his own.

Wei Wuxian finally stopped playing long enough to respond. "You and I both know you can't heal me. Focus on the people you can save. I need to put my army to rest before they turn on everyone else."

Wei Wuxian resumed playing, altering the melody to become soothing and peaceful. *The battle is over. You've gotten your revenge. Rest. You will be buried with proper rites.*

"Wei Wuxian. Don't presume that you know what I can or cannot do in terms of healing cultivators, and I won't presume to tell you how to raise undead armies, yes?"

Wei Wuxian paused. He'd been trying so hard not to hope, to just accept that this was what was going to happen. He looked over at Wen Qing, who was still standing and glaring at him despite being a full head shorter than him while he wielded a nearly invincible army of undead.

She had no reason to lie.

“You have five minutes to finish un-raising the dead, and then I’m going to put a needle in your spine and knock you out,” Wen Qing spoke calmly, holding said needle between two steady, practiced fingers.

Wei Wuxian met her gaze, and realized she was absolutely serious. She was not one of the stronger cultivators on the field in terms of battle, and he’d seen the looks of terror that even his own allies had been sending both him and his army.

Wen Qing looked decidedly more annoyed than afraid. And he had absolutely no doubt that she would be able to achieve what the entire Wen army had not been able to: incapacitate Wei Wuxian with a simple flick of her wrist.

Alright, then.

He didn’t know if he believed that she could save him, but he knew she was determined to try. He continued to play the calming melody, the notes floating into a tune that he knew deep in his memories. He’d heard it played somewhere, but he wasn’t exactly sure where or by whom, but it was somehow embedded deep within his memory.

He felt a wetness on his lip and briefly paused in playing to wipe it, his hand coming away bloody. Wen Qing’s calm demeanor evaporated as he coughed out a mouthful of blood. He looked up to find Lan Wangji staring at him, frozen, paused where he had been fighting one of the remaining pockets of Wen forces, based on the bodies strewn about ground at his feet. His face held an intent expression that Wei Wuxian could not understand.

“I take it back. You have one minute. Not five.”

Wen Qing’s voice broke Wei Wuxian out of whatever odd trance he’d been in. He broke eye contact with Lan Wangji to make sure his army of corpses was no longer fighting, the bodies from the burial mounds slumping to the ground as their resentful spirits finally released them. It took every ounce of Wei Wuxian’s remaining energy to ensure that they would accept this vengeance and trust that their bodies would be laid to rest. The last thing Wei Wuxian wanted was to simply move a huge amount of resentful energy from the Burial Mounds and just dump it someplace else.

The other cultivators looked on in shock (and no small amount of relief). There were only a few areas of active fighting now, with most of the Wen forces either dead or surrendering.

Wei Wuxian tried to find Lan Wangji again on the battlefield, but he was too dizzy and disoriented. He thought he saw a flash of purple, but his vision faded entirely. His knees gave out several seconds before his internal countdown indicated his time would be up, and he heard Wen Qing’s gasped curse and an order not to die, just as he heard Lan Wangji’s frantic shout.

“Wei Ying!”

Wei Wuxian didn’t feel his body hit the ground, nor the needle that pierced his spine the instant after. He only heard Lan Zhan’s desperate scream of his name, louder than any sound he’d ever heard the man make, even in battle. It sounded like Lan Wangji was so close to him, but that wasn’t possible. He’d been halfway across the battlefield only moments before.

He wished he'd been able to thank him for standing by him through everything. But darkness caught up before he could do anything other than breathe out, "Lan Zhan."

Wei Wuxian drifted. He had no idea where he was, or how long he'd been there. He wasn't even sure if he was dead or alive. Nothing hurt. But he couldn't feel his body at all, so that didn't mean anything. There was music playing, by someone exceptionally skilled. It soothed his body and his psyche in a way that made it almost impossible to be anxious about what his current state of existence was.

He could hear hushed voices around him, but he couldn't make out any words. He thought he must be dreaming, because one sounded like Shijie. He drifted back into unconsciousness before he could even make out if he recognized the others or not.

The next time Wei Wuxian became aware of his surroundings, he could sense light in the room. He couldn't open his eyes enough to actually see it, or anything else, but his mind was able to process that he wasn't in total darkness.

He still could not feel or move his body, but he could hear the sound of someone moving nearby him, the soft rustle of fabric breaking the stillness. He assumed they were not an enemy, because he would have been very easy to kill in his current condition.

He tried to speak, to ask about who was with him and where he was, but his lips would not part. He was able to draw a deeper breath, which immediately attracted the attention of the person who was watching him.

"Wei Wuxian. You cannot wake yet. We're not done healing your wounds. Rest."

Wen Qing. He would know that voice anywhere. But then there was a tiny prick at the base of his neck and everything was dark again.

" *What he did was forbidden. You can't keep him hidden in here. He must be made to give an account of what he has done, and face the consequences of his actions."*

Wei Wuxian could not place the voice, but it sounded like any one of many sect elders that had disapproved of him in several clans. So it had already started. He had wondered how long it would take for the sect leaders to turn on him.

"Wei Wuxian does not belong to the Lan Sect. You have no right to judge him."

That almost sounded like… Nie Mingjue? But that would make no sense.

"Wei Wuxian does not belong to ANY sect. Someone must hold him accountable. Other leaders agree."

"Other leaders DISAGREE. You are not in charge of all the other sects, Lan Qiren. Not even your own."

"Wei Wuxian is my patient, and no one is getting in to see him without my say-so."

That was definitely Wen Qing's voice, and the level of threat in it was not insignificant.

"Madam Wen. Do not forget that you are a guest of the Lan in Cloud Recesses," Lan Qiren stated crisply, with just a touch of condescension. Clearly, the man's age had not brought him the wisdom it should have granted him.

"If the support of the Lan is so easily revoked, then perhaps that was a mistake," Wen Qing replied, a cold edge to her voice. She had been raised in the house of Wen Ruohan. Threats were nothing new to her.

"Any ally of Wei Wuxian is welcome at the Unclean Realm. The Nie have heard of Healer Wen's abilities and would welcome her." That voice was one that Wei Wuxian knew he had heard before but could not place. It was smooth and deferential, but… also, somehow, not. Like a blade of a knife hidden beneath a soft fold of silk.

Nie Mingjue made a grunt of agreement, and Wei Wuxian didn't really know what to make of it. Nie Mingjue was known for his battle prowess, not his diplomacy, but the Nie and Lan sects were strong allies. Why would Nie Mingjue risk that alliance for the sake of a rogue cultivator?

Wei Wuxian was not used to people defending him. He had hoped that the Nie sect would not actively condemn him, but… he had not expected this.

" *Sect Leader Nie! The meeting is reconvening. You are needed back in the pavilion."*

Wei Wuxian was still trying to process this when a familiar voice pierced Wei Wuxian's consciousness, carrying hard and cold across the others' conversation.

"Uncle. What are you doing? I informed you earlier that Wei Ying is still recovering and was to be left alone."

Lan Wangji's voice was filled with a coldness that Wei Wuxian had never heard him use towards his uncle. This was clearly not the first argument they'd had about him, and it made Wei Wuxian's stomach twist with guilt. Wei Wuxian might have no love for Lan Qiren and his rigid, hypocritical actions, but the man had raised Lan Wangji as a father, and Lan Wangji had always striven to please him.

"Wangji, you cannot continue spending all your time playing for this demonic cultivator. You've hardly rested in days. It is not your duty to heal the likes of such a person. You should -"

"Uncle will leave now. I am going to play for Wei Ying."

There was the sound of sputtering, Lan Qiren obviously not appreciating his nephew not only breaking the rule about not interrupting, but also about respecting one's elders and deferring to their wisdom. A door opened and closed with a bit more force than was likely necessary. Wei Wuxian was able to force his eyes open.

The pristine white robes of Lan Wangji were the first thing Wei Wuxian saw.

"Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian managed, his voice hoarse from disuse.

Lan Wangji was beside him in an instant, his face full of concern.

“Wei Ying. I am here.”

To be continued...

A/N: So... any bets on who's taking which side on wwx in the next chapter?

Chapter 24: The living and the dead

A/N: Sorry this chapter is a week late. I had a super stressful thing at work where I had to give an briefing for my entire company to an industry analyst who is rankng us against our competitors and then I had to talk to a reporter and like... I AM AN INTROVERT PLEASE DON'T MAKE ME DO THINGS LIKE THIS!! I just like to do my research and write my papers and like... talk to people in small groups but not this kind of thing. And my boss' boss was like 'it's such an honor that we're asking you to do this', and I was just dying on the inside and couldn't really say no. So I had that happen a week ago then had basically a nervous breakdown when it was over and just hid under my blankets for another week and now I'm feeling better. In retrospect I should have tanked it so they would nevereverever ask me to do that again. ZazGeek had to lure me out from under my rock with kind words about my chapter because when I get anxious everything feels terrible and I was afraid to publish anything LOL. She also beta'd the chapter for me!!

The pristine white robes of Lan Wangji were the first thing Wei Wuxian saw.

"Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian breathed out, his voice hoarse from disuse.

Lan Wangji was beside him in an instant, his face full of concern.

"Wei Ying. I am here."

Wei Wuxian could only look at Lan Wangji for a moment. He hadn't expected to live, and part of his brain was still trying to understand how that even could have happened. His body was still not fully under his control, so when he tried to sit up, all that he managed to do was tense his abdominal muscles slightly. His head didn't even lift off the pillow.

"Don't try to move," Lan Wangji said, moving with unconscious grace as he sat down in a chair that Wei Wuxian had not noticed was placed at his bedside.

"I'm cold," Wei Wuxian said, realizing as he spoke the words that at least part of his numbness seemed to be because he was fucking *freezing,* despite the spring temperatures and the brazier burning in his room.

"That's because you lost almost half your blood," Wen Qing said as she entered the room, closing the door behind her with a decisive click. "Next time you go collecting arrows on a battlefield, try to keep them away from major arteries."

Her voice sounded its usual annoyed tone, but there was no mistaking the relief in her eyes.

"You didn't think I'd wake up," Wei Wuxian stated, though it was more of a question. " *I* didn't think I'd wake up. Why didn't I… how am I not dead?"

Lan Wangji made a soft sound of distress next to him, but Wei Wuxian kept his eyes locked on Wen Qing. Her mouth flattened into a tense line. "You woke up because I am an *excellent* doctor

and Lan Wangji has enormous spiritual power and evidently no desire to rest, despite this excellent doctor's orders."

She shot Lan Wangji a slightly dangerous side-eye, which Wei Wuxian followed just in time to see Lan Wangji's ears flush red.

"Lan Zhan. You need to rest. You were injured!" Wei Wuxian said, noticing for the first time the shadows beneath Lan Wangji's eyes and the very slight degree of unkemptness about his appearance. His white robes were meticulously clean, but there were slight wrinkles as though it had not been fully pressed. His hair was as tidy as ever, but the style was not as elaborate as he usually wore it, the simpler ornament looking as though it would take much less time to put on and take out. "You have to take care of yourself, Lan Zhan."

"I will take care of Wei Ying."

"Lan Zhan. You should look after yourself first! You're Hanguang Jun. Heir to GusuLan. You can't run yourself until you collapse from exhaustion. People need you!"

Wei Wuxian could feel a slight tremor run through his body from the cold. Due to his physical weakness, it was very minor and Wei Wuxian didn't even think it would have been visible, but Lan Wangji's large, warm hand was immediately pressing against his forehead.

"Wei Ying is still cold," Lan Wangji said tensely, his words indicating that this was not the first time he had made this observation and voiced his concerns.

Wei Wuxian could feel the man's worry, and it bothered him. Lan Wangji should not be worried over something as unimportant as whether Wei Wuxian was warm or cold, not while the power dynamics of the entire cultivation world had just been upended.

"Ah, Lan Zhan. I've been cold before. Like Wen Qing said, it's just from blood loss. But I'm clearly getting better, if I'm awake now. I'm sure Hanguang Jun has more important matters to worry about!"

There was a soft snort from Wen Qing's direction, but when Wei Wuxian looked over at her, her face gave nothing away. Lan Wangji withdrew his hand from Wei Wuxian's forehead, a line appearing between his perfect eyebrows.

"Brother is meeting with the other Sect Leaders. I will stay with Wei Ying."

A surge of… something… flooded through Wei Wuxian at Lan Wangji's implacable statement. Wei Wuxian knew what he was feeling was dangerous. He *knew.* Lan Wangji did not belong to him. He was the current heir to one of the major sects, and an important figure in the cultivation world, respected and admired by practically everyone.

Wei Wuxian was none of those things. He had no clan, no family, and - if the conversation he woke up to is anything to go by - he was about as far from being universally 'respected and admired' as one could get. Wei Wuxian always knew that - if he chose this path - he would be feared, not loved, by those he saved. He didn't regret it. The choice to let Wen Ruohan slaughter everyone Wei Wuxian cared about was never going to be a hard one for him to make.

But Wei Wuxian knew there would be fall-out from his actions, and Lan Wangji should not be brought down by him.

He should tell Lan Wangji to go. He should tell him to get lost.

And he would. At the first sign that Lan Wangji is becoming tainted by Wei Wuxian's presence, Wei Wuxian wouldl leave, but just for now, just for this moment, Wei Wuxian allowed himself to be weak and said nothing.

He looked up to see Wen Qing's penetrating gaze on him, and he felt suddenly exposed. There was a flicker of something in her expression that reminded him somehow of Nie Huaisang, but before he could figure it out, it was gone. Wei Wuxian chalked it up to the fatigue he was feeling beginning to fog over his mind. He wished he could get warmer, though. Another small shiver wracked his body, causing Lan Wangji's expression to tighten in displeasure.

"Hanguang Jun. Wei Wuxian's body will not be able to regulate its own temperature until his blood supply has been restored, or the Yin energy is purged enough from his body for his own spiritual energy to sustain him. The brazier will only do so much. Direct body contact is the most effective way of warming such patients."

Wei Wuxian was only vaguely following what Wen Qing was suggesting, but by the abrupt stiffening of Lan Wangji's already rigid posture, she had said something that shocked him. Surely such basic medical knowledge was not shocking to a man who had been on numerous night hunts. Having spent most of his childhood in Lotus Pier, Wei Wuxian had little experience with hypothermia but he knew the basic precepts of it.

"This will solve two problems," Wen Qing continued. "You need rest, and Wei Ying needs warmth."

"Inappropriate," Lan Wangji said, his voice blank as his eyes flickered briefly over Wei Wuxian.

Wei Wuxian ignored the tiny, irrational disappointment at Lan Wangji's obvious distaste at being in close proximity with Wei Wuxian even for medical purposes. Lan Wangji had never made any secret about his dislike of people touching him.

Wen Qing narrowed her eyes looking first at Lan Wangji's face, then at Wei Wuxian's.

"Of course. Forgive me, Hanguang Jun. A-Ning should be back soon with lunch. He will have no issue helping Wei Wuxian."

If possible, Lan Wangji seemed to stiffen even further, his entire being radiating displeasure.

"No need," Lan Wangji said tightly. He stood and walked around to the other side of the bed from where Wei Wuxian was sleeping. "As you said, it is medically efficient."

Wen Qing hummed and turned back to the table where she was heating some sort of tea.

"It will be more efficient if you remove at least one layer of your outer robes." She went back to ignoring them and focusing on whatever medication she was preparing. "Wei Wuxian, do not fall asleep until you have eaten. Your blood can't replenish without food and water."

Wei Wuxian didn't even realize his eyes had slid closed. He startled as he felt the bed dip, and turned his head to see Lan Wangji slipping under the covers next to him. Lan Wangji was obviously incredibly uncomfortable with the forced intimacy (his body was held so tightly it was as though a jade statue had been placed next to him beneath the blankets rather than an actual human), except… except Lan Wangji was so *warm*.

Wei Wuxian turned his head slightly towards him, wishing his body was strong enough to turn fully towards the warmth. He wouldn't, of course, even if he had the strength. He would keep to his side of the bed and not make matters even more uncomfortable for Lan Wangji. He was quite sure that Lan Wangji had never shared a bed with anyone, and equally sure that - in any other circumstance - he would not willingly choose to share one with Wei Wuxian.

But Wei Wuxian was cold, his entire body ached and felt drained, leaving him feeling physically vulnerable in a way he was not used to. The solid, *warm* presence of Lan Wangji's body next to his was something he was not strong enough to turn down. Another shiver rippled through him, and Lan Wangji shifted closer, their bodies touching side-by-side.

"Lan Zhan. How are you so warm?" Wei Wuxian asked, wishing he could pull Lan Wangji on top of him like a blanket. He immediately shoved the thought away, with no small amount of internal panic, not entirely sure where the errant idea had come from but *definitely* sure that Lan Wangji would be mortally embarrassed and probably offended if he knew about it.

"Unlike you, Hanguang Jun doesn't go around catching arrows with his chest and then dumping half his blood out on the battlefield with a blocked fucking Golden Core. That is how he stays so warm. You should try it some time," Wen Qing snapped.

Wei Wuxian breathed out a puff of laughter. If Wen Qing was this pissed off at him, he must be out of the danger zone. His mind drifted as the warmth of Lan Wangji's body seeped into him. He was lucky that Wen Qing had been on the battlefield, or he would not be around to enjoy the feeling of slowly regaining warmth into his body.

A thought abruptly struck him.

"If you and Wen Ning are both here, where's A-Yuan?" Wei Wuxian asked, terrified at even the thought of little A-Yuan being anywhere near the battle. Would A-Yuan fear him if he had seen Wei Wuxian leading an army of the dead?

Of course he would. You're a monster now. Why wouldn't an innocent child fear you?

"Don't be stupid, Wei Wuxian," Wen Qing said while she strained some of the liquid she'd been brewing into a cup. "A-Yuan is safe back in Cloud Recesses. When A-Ning and I overheard that you were leading an army out of the Burial Mounds, we figured you were going to do something ridiculously reckless to yourself. Again. So we left A-Yuan with a family that has a child his age."

Wei Wuxian ignored the statement about himself being reckless. "They won't mind taking care of him? A-Yuan wasn't raised with all the rules that the Lan children follow."

Wen Qing snorted a soft laugh. "That won't be an issue. The child A-Yuan has made friends with has already earned the reputation of being extremely un-Lan-like in his ability to follow the

rules. Evidently it was a relief for them to find a child willing to play with their son. They're inseparable."

Wei Wuxian felt some of the stress ease out of him. A-Yuan was safe, and making friends. His pleasant thoughts were interrupted by the decidedly *un* pleasant aroma wafting from the steaming cup Wein Qing had brought to him. He wrinkled his nose in protest, earning a dead-eyed look from her.

"I don't care if you don't like the taste. You will drink it," she stated.

Lan Wangji hummed in stern agreement, his arm wrapping around Wei Wuxian's shoulders to lift him up to a semi-sitting position so he could drink it without spilling. Wei Wuxian felt a flush of embarrassment that he had to be fed like a child, but his body was still too weak to do much of anything. Just the act of speaking was exhausting him. Lan Wagnji's arm around him was solid and strong, and the warmth of the liquid combined with its bitter taste gave him something other than mortification at his own weakness to think about. He drank it all, Wen Qing and Lan Wangji not relenting until there was not a single drop left.

Lan Wangji gently lowered Wei Wuxian back down so his head rested against the pillow, but he did not remove his arm. The solid warmth of Lan Wangji's arm beneath him made Wei Wuxian feel ridiculously safe and a bunch of other complicated things that confused and somewhat panicked him. He decided to not think about it and just enjoy the warmth. He distracted himself by launching into the most top-of-mind question he had since finding himself surprisingly alive.

"So," Wei Wuxian said, looking at Wen Qing. "How did you do it?"

Wen Qing paused on her way to put the mug back by the brazier at his question, and looked over her shoulder at him.

"Do what?"

"Keep me from dying. The arrow didn't get my heart but I could feel how close it was. And it hit my lung for sure. I could hardly get enough breath to play *Chenqing* . When I started to release the Yin energy to put the corpses to rest, I could feel how much blood I was losing. You shouldn't have been able to help me in time."

Lan Wangji's arm tensed beneath him. Wen Qing was silent as she placed the mug down. Her hands pausing briefly on it before she fully released it.

"I used my needles to put you under. It slowed your heart rate and blocked any pain. The blood flow was still an issue. I had herbs that slowed the bleeding but they were not enough. Lan Wangji gave me the last of his spiritual energy to fuse with mine, and we applied it directly to the wound."

Wei Wuxian thought about what she said. "But I was so full of Yin energy. That shouldn't have worked. If you applied Yang energy to my body it would just...," he cut off, getting a glimmer of what might have happened.

"It would react and the energies would neutralize each other. They did. We used the process to cauterize the worst of the wound. Once the local area was purified of Yin energy, we were able to apply more spiritual energy to accelerate the healing process enough to keep you alive."

Wei Wuxian nodded slowly. “So the reason I feel like shit overall is that my body still is too full of Yin energy for my core to access most of it, but I’m alive because you two cleared out the most important area.”

“Basically,” Wen Qing agreed.

It was a good thing that Wen Qing was a brilliant doctor, because the idea of using the volatile reaction between Yin and Yang energies to cauterize a wound would not likely have occurred to anyone else.

Wei Wuxian had too many emotions churning in him to be able to identify any of them. He had almost died. *Should* have died. Lan Wangji had carved his way through a literal battlefield to help save him. Wen Qing had passed any number of other injured cultivators, many from her own sect, to heal him. Wen Ning, the gentlest person he’d ever met, had surged into battle and killed members of his own clan for him.

The battle had been basically over by that point. Wei Wuxian already managed to put his army to rest. There had been no need for anyone to save him. But they had.

Why? How many others had died because he took their attention away from the battle?

Wei Wuxian closed his eyes, feeling overwhelmed and exhausted. He could feel both Wen Qing and Lan Wangji’s concerned eyes on him, but he couldn’t look at them. Still, even without opening his eyes, he could feel the warmth from Lan Wangji’s body seeping into his. He couldn’t deal with any of his thoughts at that moment, so he focused instead on the sound of Lan Wangji’s breathing and the steady rhythm of his heartbeat. After a few moments, Wei Wuxian found his own heart rate settling back down into a less erratic rhythm, his breathing slowing to match the steady pace of Lan Wangji’s breaths.

He was just starting to drift off to sleep when he heard the door open. He opened his eyes to see Wen Ning bringing in lunch, followed by someone who instantly made his spirits lift.

“Shijie! You’re here?”

Wei Wuxian tried to sit up, but he wasn’t any more successful than he had been the last time. His sister rushed to his side, her eyes filled with tears.

“A-Xian! You’re awake!” She knelt by his bed and cupped his face with gentle fingers, drinking in the sight of him.

He gave her his best smile, feeling his eyes crinkle nearly completely shut. “Shijie. I’m sorry if you were worried. I’m fine. Just tired. And cold. But Wen Qing and Lan Zhan are doing their best to warm me up.”

Jiang Yanli had been so overcome to see her brother’s eyes finally open and alert that she had not paid any attention to her surroundings. She suddenly realized that her little brother was not alone in the bed. Her eyes widened, and her cheeks flushed a deep pink. “Oh! H-hanguang Jun! I didn’t… see you there. In A-Xian’s bed.”

Her tone seemed almost a warning one, but Wei Wuxian was sure he must just be imagining it. Jiang Yanli was always perfectly polite to other cultivators. Wei Wuxian did not turn to see the brilliant red that Lan Wangji's ears had turned.

"Yeah, Wen Qing said that my body temperature won't really stabilize until I get my blood volume back up or access to my core, so she bullied Lan Zhan into warming me up since Wen Ning wasn't here even though he hates being touched. He's probably dying to get back to his own bed. Sometimes he's just too nice for his own good. Wen Ning! It's a good thing you showed up!" Wei Wuxian felt Lan Wangji tense beside him and shift slightly closer to Wei Wuxian. "Those were some excellent archery skills. Your aim has really improved! You must have been training hard."

There was an awkward silence, and Wen Ning looked very briefly at Lan Wangji, then - for some reason - paled and stepped back.

Wen Qing rolled her eyes. "Honestly, Wei Wuxian. I don't understand how *anyone* thinks you're a genius."

"What?" Wei Wuxian said, though it turned into a yawn. The warmth of Lan Wangji's body was making him sleepy. Even though he'd only been conscious for a short while, it felt like he'd been cold forever.

But now that his sister was here, there was something he needed to know before he could sleep. He looked at his Shijie, taking in how pale and tired she was.

"Shijie, what happened to Lotus Pier?"

Jiang Yanli glanced over to Wen Qing, who only sighed. Wei Wuxian's heart clenched. If the news was good, they wouldn't be trying to shield him from it.

"Just tell me," he said, bracing for the worst. He'd seen the smoke rise from Lotus Pier, and wasn't naive enough to believe that everyone had escaped unharmed.

"We were able to get the younger disciples and the villagers out," Jiang Yanli said, wrapping her hands around Wei Wuxian's. "Thanks to your talisman, and your warning, A-Xian. You saved so many of your *shidis* ."

"Jiang *guniang* is selling herself short," Wen Qing said brusquely. "From what I've been told by the refugees, she orchestrated a clever evacuation plan, leading them in small groups through the jungle to avoid detection, taking the youngest children with her to keep them from getting lost."

Wei Wuxian felt pride swell in his chest. Everyone discounted Jiang Yanli because her core was not strong, and her health was frail. But she was clever and brave and really the most amazing person he had ever met. Shijie and Lan Zhan were just… their own breed of human. No one else came close.

"I knew my shijie would do it," Wei Wuxian said, smiling at her so full of love and pride that he felt like his heart might just burst out of his chest. Jiang Yanli blushed at the praise that only her brothers ever gave her, looking down at their clasped hands. "Shijie is amazing."

“Hm. Evidently you’re not the only one who thinks so,” Wen Qing said cryptically, causing Jiang Yanli’s blush to deepen dramatically.

“What’s this?” Wei Wuxian asked, half delighted and half suspicious. If some asshole was sniffing around his sister, being inappropriate, Wei Wuxian was more than happy to add one more body to be buried with his army of corpses.

“It’s nothing,” Jiang Yanli said quickly.

“Is someone bothering you?” Wei Wuxian said darkly.

“No! Nothing like that. It’s only…,” Jiang Yanli trailed off helplessly.

“Young Master Jin has been trailing around after her like a lovesick puppy, singing her praises to anyone who will listen,” Wen Qing replied, amusement coloring her words.

Wei Wuxian felt conflicted. Judging by his Shijie’s expression, this attention by Jin Zixuan was not unwelcome. And Shijie definitely deserved all the praise and admiration in the world. But the Peacock was still the Peacock and he didn’t like the idea of him anywhere in the vicinity of his Shijie.

“Did he at least help you to get the others to safety?” Wei Wuxian asked, deciding that he would withhold judgement if Jin Zixuan had actually done more than just look pretty while trailing after Shijie.

“Oh, yes! Zixuan and MianMian were the only two cultivators who were with us. They scouted and took care of any small pockets of Wen soldiers we couldn’t avoid. We wouldn’t have made it without them.”

Wei Wuxian rubbed his nose thoughtfully. He remembered MianMian. She was one of the few Jin cultivators he’d met who didn’t act like everyone else around her was an unwashed dishrag. It still didn’t make him like the fact that Shijie now felt comfortable enough with the Peacock to call him *Zixuan* , for fuck’s sake, but her face softened with happiness at the mention of his name despite her obvious stress and worry. If Jin Zixuan was making his sister find any sort of happiness in the middle of this fucking war, Wei Wuxian would be willing to tolerate him. Mostly.

“And what about the others?” Wei Wuxian asked, finally bringing up the question he had most feared to ask. “Is there word yet of what happened after you left?”

Jiang Yanli’s smile froze, and Wei Wuxian felt his lungs do the same. There was news, and it wasn’t good.

Wei Wuxian swallowed past the sudden constriction in his throat. “Then… everyone else… Jiang Cheng? Uncle Fengmian? Madam Yu? All the other shidis?”

“They…,” Jiang Yanli’s throat closed off, but she squared her shoulders and continued. “Mother and Father wanted to defend Lotus Pier. A-Cheng and I tried to talk them out of fighting, and to retreat with the rest of us and return when we had reinforcements so we could take Lotus Pier back. But Mother stated that she would not run away. A-Cheng insisted that they at least let me leave with the younger disciples and the civilians, who had no chance in the fight.”

Wei Wuxian nodded, relief filling him even as the dread built. He was not sure that Madam Yu would have considered allowing the civilians or the younger disciples to flee without being asked about it, but he was glad to hear that at least she had not opposed it.

“I begged A-Cheng to go with me, but he said...,” she drew another shaky breath. “... he said he would stay and fight by their side and try to protect them. Zixuan had arrived by then and he said he would accompany me to help evacuate the others. Mother said that this proved that the Jin were not involved, but Zixuan said that he had gone against his father’s orders to come and give aid to Lotus Pier. He… his father told him if he left, he could not return to Koi Tower.”

“ *Fuck* Jin Guangshan,” Wei Wuxian growled. “He is a greedy coward who hides behind his women and his money.”

Jiang Yanli bit her lip at the harsh words about the leader of one of the major sects, but she didn’t dispute Wei Wuxian’s words.

“The Wen attacked only hours after Zixuan, MianMian and I had left. The numbers were… as you’d said they’d be. Lotus Pier was overrun. Many of the cultivators were killed. Mother was fighting and she didn’t see the cultivator behind her. Father…,” Jiang Yanli swallowed harshly, but tears were streaming down her face. “Father stepped in and blocked the blow, but he was struck in his sword arm. He couldn’t dodge the second strike.”

Wei Wuxian felt as though his heart was ripped from his chest. He didn’t want to hear her say the words and make it real, but he had to know. “So Uncle Fengmian…?”

Jiang Yanli shook her head, unable to continue. She laid her head on Wei Wuxian’s chest as she cried. He wished he had the strength to sit up on hold her, but all he could do was wrap one arm around her and gently stroke her hair.

“I’m sorry. Shijie, I’m so sorry I wasn’t there,” Wei Wuxian said, guilt swamping through him. He’d tried so hard, but had still failed to save the man who had rescued him from starving on the streets when he was a child.

“You did what you could,” Lan Wangji said. “You tried to warn them. You drew the army away.”

“A-Xian. Hanguang Jun is right. You aren’t to blame for this,” Jiang Yanli said, her voice choked.

“But it still wasn’t enough,” Wei Wuxian said bitterly.

“Wei Ying,’ Lan Wangji said, his arm tightening around Wei Wuxian’s shoulders as though he could physically suppress the guilt and anguish welling up inside Wei Wuxian’s body.

Wen Qing spoke from where she had been quietly observing from the other side of the room, monitoring how her patient would handle the devastating news.

“The majority of the Yunmeng Jiang forces had used up their spiritual power by the time Sect Leader Jiang fell. Most were wounded. Jiang Cheng… Sect Leader Jiang, now I suppose, ordered the remaining cultivators to retreat. He loaded the injured onto the ships. Madam Yu had lost an arm and was unconscious. They would have all been easily pursued and wiped out had it not been for your attack drawing the Wen forces away and preventing them from giving chase.

They *all* would have died if you hadn't led your army out of the Burial Mounds. The rest of us would have died as well, if you had not stopped Wen Ruohan's army. You can't save everyone, Wei Wuxian. Do not be so arrogant. You are not a god."

Wei Wuxian heard the words, but could not respond. He felt Jiang Yanli's arms tighten around him, trying to comfort him despite her own terrible loss. Shijie was alive. Jiang Cheng was alive. Madam Yu was… going to live. Some of his shidis had made it, as had all the civilians. But it didn't feel like enough. Why couldn't he have saved them all?

"She is right, Wei Ying." Lan Wangji's voice was deep and earnest. Wei Wuxian looked over to find Lan Wangji's eyes locked on him, filled with a depth of worry and understanding that Wei Wuxian didn't know how to deal with. "You nearly died trying to save everyone. But you cannot single handedly save the world. Wei Ying did enough."

Wei Wuxian closed his eyes, feeling the hot slide of tears down his face. If he had had more time to plan, he could have found a way to save the others. He was sure of it. He just hadn't been smart enough to figure it out in time. Uncle Fengmian should not have died due to Wei Wuxian's failure. The room was spinning and Wei Wuxian found it harder and harder to breathe. He felt Lan Wangji's arm lifting him slightly and pulling him closer.

"Wei Ying! Wen Qing, he's not breathing well!" Lan Wangji's voice was full of worry, but Wei Wuxian couldn't catch his breath enough to tell him it would be fine.

"A-Xian!" Jiang Yanli's worried cry made him feel even worse at causing her more distress after everything she'd been through.

"Wei Wuxian. You need to rest." Wen Qing's words and the sharp prick of a needle in his neck were all he registered before everything went dark again.

To be continued...

A/N - so a few of you had called this. madam yu lives, but will never cultivate again and has to face the death of Fengmian for her mistake. We shall see how she handles this, if she acknowledges it or not. And wwx will join the council meeting and hear what the sects have to say about him.

Chapter 25: Open wounds

A/N - Thank you for all the amazing comments!!! I am behind in my replies, but I will get caught up eventually LOL. Also, thank you to ZazGeek for beta-ing this chapter!

Voices whispered in Wei Wuxian's head, memories that were not his own twisted through him. They blended with the unpleasant dream he'd already immersed in, where his undead army slashed through the horde of cultivators trying to take him down. Flashes of blood, fear, and pain. Some were his own (looking down to see the arrow pierce his chest, the sight of his corpses ripping apart mercenaries and cultivators all around him), but some were not (a young child watching his parents cut down in front of him, a woman begging for her life before the sword slit her throat).

His stomach clenched and he tried to twist away from the gruesome images in his mind's eye, buried under the weight of suffering that he had not been able to prevent, and the suffering that he had caused. His breaths came in shallow pants, as though his body was trying to run away from the shadowy memories and images. He couldn't breathe. His lung, it was-

"Wei Ying."

Something warm and solid was placed on his chest, and - almost immediately - a sense of calm flooded into him. Someone was channeling their spiritual energy into him.

"Wei Ying. I am here."

Wei Wuxian opened his eyes, drawing a shaky breath. He looked up to find Lan Wangji half sitting up in the bed next to him, one arm braced against the mattress beside him. He was turned towards Wei Wuxian, looking at him with concern. Lan Wangji's large hand splayed across Wei Wuxian's chest as he channeled energy into him.

"Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian managed, his voice hoarse and somewhat shaky. His skin was covered in sweat, and his under robe was sticking to him uncomfortably. "Sorry. If I woke you."

"Do not apologize. I was already awake," Lan Wangji said calmly, not stopping the flow of energy into Wei Wuxian. "And even if I wasn't, there would be no need to apologize."

Wei Wuxian felt the twisting panic and dread slowly ebbing out of his body. There was something calming about Lan Wangji's qi. It was somehow both warm and cooling, temporarily steadying the chaos that seemed to always rage within Wei Wuxian's mind since the Burial Mounds.

"Feels good," Wei Wuxian murmured, letting himself relax back against the pillow. His eyes drifted closed, sinking into the warmth emanating from Lan Wangji by his side. Proof that they were both alive, not cold like the corpses lying in the fields around them.

Lan Wangji had made it through the battle with only minor injuries. Wen Qing, Wen Ning and A-Yuan were safe. Shijie and Jiang Cheng were safe.

Of course, not everyone had made it. He hadn't been able to save Jiang Fengmian or Lotus Pier, and he would still need to face whatever fallout there was going to be with the other sects, but he would at least be grateful that the worst case scenario had not come to pass.

He opened his eyes to find Lan Wangji still looking down at him, his face intent. With the fogginess of the nightmare fading, the reality of the fact that they were both in Wei Wuxian's bed in only their under robes flooded through him. Wei Wuxian felt his face flush hotly, though - rationally - it didn't make sense for him to be embarrassed. He'd shared a bed with Jiang Cheng and other Jiang disciples on night hunts in the past plenty of times. There was nothing improper, or even really personal about it. Wen Qing had told Lan Wangji to keep Wei Wuxian warm, and so he had.

Wei Wuxian decided the reason it felt strange to have Lan Wangji in bed with him rather than any other random fellow cultivator, huddling for warmth, was that Lan Wangji was always just so put together and *proper*. Every layer of his robes pristine and every hair in place. But now, Lan Wangji was in bed with him, the blanket rumpled and warm. His long, silky hair was unbound, falling forward to brush softly against the edge of Wei Wuxian's shoulder.

The single layer of Lan Wangji's under robe did nothing to hide the strength of his broad shoulders. Wei Wuxian found himself following the line of Lan Wangji's throat to where the robes pulled slightly taut over the sharp cut of his collar bone, and the muscles of his shoulders.

While most of what Lan Wangji was known for was the strength of his cultivation, Wei Wuxian was caught for a moment on just how physically strong Lan Wangji was, with or without his golden core. It wasn't like Wei Wuxian didn't already *know* this about Lan Wangji. The man had grown up doing handstands on the daily while copying rules and texts to discipline both his body and his mind. *Obviously* he would be strong. But, somehow, the sheer physicality of Lan Wangji had never struck Wei Wuxian in the way it did now.

Strange thoughts flickered through Wei Wuxian's mind, wondering if Lan Wangji rolled fully over and pinned Wei Wuxian down, would he be able to get up? Their golden cores were pretty evenly matched. The thought of it sent the same sharp spike of adrenaline that Wei Wuxian had felt when he first met Lan Wangji, and had battled him over the rooftops of Cloud Recesses in the moonlight. The thrill of someone who could finally match him. But this time, the heady rush he felt flood through him had a slightly different tone. It twisted down low in his belly in a way that left him feeling unsettled.

He looked back up to meet Lan Wangji's gaze, and found that the amber eyes had darkened somewhat from when he'd first woken up. It made him feel restless, like his skin was somehow too tight or too… something. The strange intensity in Lan Wangji's gaze only made it worse, and Wei Wuxian felt his breath stutter in his chest in a way that had nothing to do with the arrow that had pierced his lung.

The sound of Wen Qing's voice snapped him out of whatever odd trance he'd slipped into.

"Wei Wuxian, are you finally awake?" Wen Qing walked into the room, her eyes quickly taking in the scene before her, with Lan Wangji half sitting up in bed, turned towards Wei Wuxian. "You need to eat, and take your medicine."

“His fever returned,” Lan Wangji said, smoothly rising from the bed in the early morning light.

Wei Wuxian immediately felt the loss of the solid warmth from beside him, and he forced himself not to ask Lan Wangji to stay. His body temperature seemed almost normal now, except for the clamminess that the sweat on his skin brought. But he was no longer in danger of becoming hypothermic, and obviously the Second Jade of GusuLan would have more important things to do than keeping Wei Wuxian’s nightmares at bay.

He closed his eyes, letting Wen Qing’s clinical fingertips assess his injury as well as his spiritual pathways. When Lan Wangji stopped channeling his qi, the murmurs of the memories of the spirits from the Burial Mounds picked up again.

The voices were always there, sometimes soft, sometimes loud, but the whispering never ceased ever since he opened his mind to them in the Burial Mounds. He had not slept much since then. His first night out of the cursed area was spent being mostly unconscious. During the night after he’d killed Wen Chao, he’d spent most of the time trying to purge the Yin energy from his body in order to be able to cultivate. He’d had only a handful of nights since then, and none of them had been restful.

By the looks of the sunlight filtering into the room, he’d slept nearly half a day. He wondered if Lan Wangji had been beside him the whole time, and if Wei Wuxian had woken him up with each nightmare, disturbing his sleep when Lan Wangji needed to be resting for all the decisions he would likely be involved with now that the war was over.

He hoped the nightmares faded. He might have Lan Wangji with him for the moment, but Wei Wuxian would be on his own again as soon as he was healed, and he’d need to have his dreams under control if he was going to get any sort of restful sleep.

He realized that Wen Qing had been talking to him, and he’d missed most of what she’d said.

“I asked you how your breathing is,” she repeated, a frown on her brow as she studied him.

“It’s fine,” Wei Wuxian replied automatically.

“Oh? Then why did it sound like you were trying to sprint through sand when I came in.”

Lan Wangji stepped out from behind the privacy screen, fully dressed in his layered Gusu robes, looking concerned.

“It was just… dreams. But my breathing is ok as long as I’m just laying here.”

His words did not seem to soothe either Wen Qing nor Lan Wangji.

“Dreams?” Wen Qing asked.

Wei Wuxian tried to shrug, but his injury only allowed a small shifting of his shoulder. “Yeah. Whatever. It’s not a big deal. What’s the plan for today? I’m guessing that they aren’t going to let me just lay around for much longer.”

“Wei Ying will have as much time as Wei Ying needs to recover,” Lan Wangji said firmly.

Wei Wuxian saw Wen Qing's gaze flicker to Lan Wangji for a moment, consideringly, but she did not refute his statement.

Wei Wuxian wished he could get up and take a bath, the sweat on his skin turning cold as the nightmare faded along with the fever, but he was too exhausted. He promised himself he'd do it the next time he woke.

"Why is he still sleeping? I thought you said he was ok!?"

The dulcet tones of Jiang Cheng's eternal rage brought Wei Wuxian out of his sleep later that evening.

The fact that his brother could still sound this angry soothed a fear that Wei Wuxian had been harboring, wondering if Jiang Cheng would be able to handle the death of his father.

"Aiya. Jiang Cheng. So noisy," Wei Wuxian said, slowly pushing himself up to a half-sitting/half-laying position. It was the most he'd been able to move on his own since he took the arrow to his chest, and he was happy to ignore the way his arms shook and his chest ached with the motion.

Wen Qing did not feel the same, as she strode quickly over to him and adjusted his pillow so his weight was supported. "If you reopen the wound, I will put a second arrow into you myself," she scolded.

"Wei Wuxian. Don't think you can get out of helping with all the post war bullshit just by reinjuring yourself!" Jiang Cheng stormed across the room, glaring down at Wei Wuxian, but Wei Wuxian was able to see the way Jiang Cheng's eyes searched his face and form intently, assessing his injury and health.

"A-Cheng," Jiang Yanli's gentle voice came from the doorway, where she had been following Jiang Cheng at a calmer pace. "A-Xian has already done more than enough. Let him rest."

Jiang Cheng's lips compressed into a tight line that many would interpret as anger, but Wei Wuxian knew was actually worry.

Jiang Yanli came and sat down in the chair that usually was occupied by Lan Wangji. Wei Wuxian realized that he wasn't currently in the room, and briefly felt a pang of loss, until he reminded himself that Lan Wangji was not obligated to play nursemaid to someone his sect had condemned. He had already risked enough for Wei Wuxian.

As always, Jiang Yanli seemed to be able to read the things that Wei Wuxian was not able to say.

"Hanguang Jun is meeting with Zewu Jun and the Lan elders. He said he would be back before dinner," Jiang Yanli said.

Deciding that Jiang Cheng's temper was not an imminent risk to her patient's safety, Wen Qing stepped out to give the three some privacy.

“What, we’re not good enough to hang out with?” Jiang Cheng asked, pulling a stool from the other side of the room over so he could sit beside Jiang Yanli.

Wei Wuxian was well practiced at seeing through Jiang Cheng’s bluster.

“Jiang Cheng,” Wei Wuxian said, his voice low. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there.”

Jiang Cheng’s jaw clenched.

“A-Xian. It wasn’t your fault,” Jiang Yanli said gently, her voice filled with both sadness and comfort. She was one of the most selfless people that Wei Wuxian had ever known. She’d just lost her father, and she was trying to comfort Wei Wuxian.

Jiang Cheng remained silent, his throat working. Wei Wuxian knew how his brother’s mind worked. Even if Madam Yu had forbidden Wei Wuxian from helping, Jiang Cheng had grown up with his older brother always being there for him. Wei Wuxian had taken the Jiang philosophy of ‘attempt the impossible’ and owned it more than anyone of Fengmian’s own bloodline could ever claim.

But when it mattered the most, Wei Wuxian had failed to do the impossible. He had not been able to save Lotus Pier or Jiang Cheng’s father.

Jiang Cheng had not forgiven Wei Wuxian for it, and maybe he wouldn’t be able to. Which was fair, because Wei Wuxian was also not likely to be able to forgive himself, either.

The room was filled with a heavy silence, the air thick with grief. The three had grown up as siblings, and while Jiang Fengmian had had many flaws as both a father and a sect leader, his loss was still an open wound that reached deep.

Wei Wuxian knew that Jiang Chen would struggle heavily with the loss. His whole life had been a battle to get acknowledgement from his father - to get out from under Wei Wuxian’s shadow as well as away from the power play his mother pulled him into in her brittle marriage with Jiang Fengmian. Jiang Cheng had worked endlessly for his father’s attention and approval. It was his whole purpose for the majority of his life.

“Stop staring at me like that,” Jiang Cheng bit out.

Wei Wuxian briefly thought about trying to lighten the mood with a joke about Jiang Cheng’s face not worth staring at, but decided against it.

“Ugh, just fucking *say* something. Don’t watch me like I’m some sort of fragile piece of glass that’s about to break. I’m fucking *handling it.* We all are,” Jiang Cheng said, glaring at Wei Wuxian as though daring him to say that Jiang Cheng was not ok.

“Alright,” Wei Wuxian said, looking over to Jiang Yanli.

She gave him a small smile, and squeezed his hand. Things would likely be strained for a while between her two brothers, but she would try to be the glue that held them together.

“A-Xian. There was nothing more you could have done. Without you, we wouldn’t have been able to save the people we did.” Jiang Yanli’s voice was both gentle and firm at the same time.

Wei Wuxian realized she was saying this as much for Jiang Cheng's benefit as she was for Wei Wuxian's.

He appreciated her words, but they didn't do anything to erase the guilt he felt about Jiang Fengmian's death.

"I should have been there."

"And what," Jiang Cheng snapped, not looking at him. "Fought with the guards mother would have sent against you?"

The anger in Jiang Cheng's voice was likely directed at a lot of people. His mother, for her stubborn pride. His father, for his weakness in standing up for her. Wei Wuxian, for not somehow still finding a way to save them. And himself, for not being able to save his father or forgive his brother.

Jiang Yanli was weeping silently, and Wei Wuxian wished he could go back in time to find a way to live up to his little brother's expectations, and save his sister this grief.

"He spoke with me," Jiang Cheng said, still not looking up.

"Unc - Sect Leader Fengmian?" Wei Wuxian corrected himself, earning a glare from Jiang Cheng. It was worth it, as it was the first time Jiang Cheng had looked at him in a while.

"I saw Father go down. I tried to get to him, I tried to…," Jiang Cheng drew a shaky breath. "I tried. But I didn't get there fast enough. He knew he was dying. He said -," Jiang Cheng paused.

The silence dragged on so long that Wei Wuxian wondered if Jiang Cheng had changed his mind about sharing his father's last words with the man he blamed for not being able to save him. Eventually, Jiang Cheng spoke.

"He said he should have stood up to Mother. He knew you were right. He knew…," Jiang Cheng's fists clenched in his lap. "He said he should never have let her throw you out of the sect."

Wei Wuxian's body felt numb, though he could feel the burn in his eyes. Jiang Fengmian never directly disagreed with Madam Yu, at least not about Wei Wuxian. It was as though he felt so guilty for bringing Wei Wuxian into their sect in the first place over her objections that he could only give statements of general disapproval, but never overrule her wishes outright.

Wei Wuxian had often wondered if Jiang Fengmian regretted his decision to allow Wei Wuxian to stay with them, despite the obvious pride and affection that Jiang Fengmian had always shown him.

He felt a warm pressure on his hands, and looked down through blurry eyes to see Jiang Yanli's small, delicate hands holding his.

"Father told A-Cheng that he should make his own decisions about how to protect the sect, and he would be a better sect leader than he had been, and that he was proud of him," Jiang Yanli said, when it was clear that Jiang Cheng was not able to continue for the moment.

Jiang Fengmian had as good as admitted he nearly destroyed his sect, but at least he had given Jiang Cheng permission to save what was left. Jiang Cheng had clearly gotten the message, as he had called a retreat almost immediately upon Jiang Fengmian's death. Wei Wuxian wondered what Madam Yu thought about her husband's last words. If she even knew about them. He knew that she had been severely injured, but he wasn't sure of her current status. Given their rocky history, Wei Wuxian wasn't sure he had the right to ask about her. But in the end, he had to know.

"Madam Yu?" Wei Wuxian asked, looking at Jiang Yanli because he couldn't quite meet Jiang Cheng's gaze.

Jiang Yanli's lips trembled, then tightened. "She has lost her arm, and her core was damaged. She will survive, but…"

Wei Wuxian closed his eyes. Madam Yu would survive, but she would never be strong like she had been before. Madam Yu's entire identity was tied up in her pride about her cultivation prowess and iron rule over her family. Every scathing comment she had thrown at Jiang Yanli for being weak in her core, and weak in her constitution; every cutting remark she had given Jiang Cheng for not being as strong or talented as Wei Wuxian; every condescending statement she'd made to undercut Jiang Fengmian's leadership… Now Madam Yu would be the weakest of her surviving family.

Wei Wuxian could only feel sadness for her. If Jiang Fengmian had not been in love with Wei Wuxian's mother before he had married Madam Yu, if Wei Wuxian's parents had lived instead of dying so unexpectedly, if Wei Wuxian had never been brought to Lotus Pier as a constant reminder that someone else had held Jiang Fengmian's heart at one point, maybe Madam Yu's fate would have been different. Maybe she could have been a strong partner and mother instead of a spiteful tyrant.

And now, in her own mind, she would be nothing but a burden. If they had had a different relationship, he would have tried to talk with her about it. But Wei Wuxian knew that the absolute last person she would want to see right now was him.

"I'm sorry," was all Wei Wuxian could say.

Jiang Cheng looked at him sharply, as though wondering if Wei Wuxian was sincere. Whatever he saw in Wei Wuxian's face caused his own to soften.

Jiang Cheng nodded, but did not reply. Jiang Yanli gave him a sad smile, fully aware of all the same things that Wei Wuxian had been thinking. No one had faced Madam Yu's derision for weakness the way she had. Yet, in the end, Jiang Yanli had done more to protect their people than Madam Yu had.

The moment was broken when Wen Qing returned, followed by Lan Wangji and Lan Xichen.

"Wei Wuxian needs to rest," Wen Qing stated after taking one look at Wei Wuxian's face. She glared at Jiang Cheng, who actually *blushed* at the look rather than glaring back. Wei Wuxian realized he had missed something important, but he was not given time to get any additional information.

“Sect Leader Jiang. Jiang Guniang. Wei Wuxian,” Lan Xichen bowed in greeting. The others returned the greeting.

Lan Wangji came to stand on the other side of Wei Wuxian’s bed, looking at him with concern. He greeted Jiang Yanli politely, but eyed Jiang Cheng with wariness.

“Wei Ying. I did not know you would have visitors.”

The look Lan Wangji shot Jiang Cheng made it clear that he was the one that Lan Wangji considered a visitor rather than family. Evidently, the exchange at Lotus Pier had not been forgotten. Jiang Cheng bristled, and opened his mouth to reply, but Lan Xichen beat him to it.

“Sect Leader Jiang. The session will be resuming shortly,” Lan Xichen said, and Jiang Cheng rose, knowing he would need to join the meeting. Lan Xichen turned to Wei Wuxian. “Wei Wuxian. If you are up to it, it might be in your benefit to attend.”

“Brother. Wei Ying is not well enough,” Lan Wangji said immediately. This was clearly an argument they had had before.

Jiang Cheng’s angry scowl deepend. “He just had a fucking arrow shot into him. Can’t they wait?”

Wei Wuxian’s eyebrows raised in surprise. Lan Wangji was generally a protective person, but Jiang Cheng’s philosophy of ‘protection’ tended to lean more towards the ‘what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger so just stop fucking whining and do it already’ view. The tiny flicker of Lan Wangji’s eyes indicated that he was equally surprised.

“Why should I go?” Wei Wuxian asked, ignoring the glares from the majority of the people in the room.

Lan Xichen looked at Lan Wangji, and they seemed to have some sort of silent exchange before Lan Xichen turned back to Wei Wuxian.

“Some of the sect leaders have expressed… concerns about your army,” Lan Xichen said calmly.

“Concerns?” Lan Wangji’s voice was cold and sharp as a sword. It never ceased to amaze Wei Wuxian just how much the man was able to compress into a single look or word.

“What the fuck are they concerned about?! The fact that they weren’t wiped out?!” Jiang Cheng’s anger found a new target as he glared at Lan Xichen.

Lan Wangji gave Jiang Cheng a slight side-eye, as though re-evaluating him.

“The last thing Wei Wuxian needs is stress right now. His qi is still not fully stable, and neither is his body,” Wen Qing said, standing by Lan Wangji’s side to face Lan Xichen.

Lan Xichen held up his hands in a gentle gesture of supplication. “I am not saying I agree with what they’re saying. But I think it would be best to have Wei Wuxian present to address any concerns before things escalate.” Lan Xichen turned his gaze to Jiang Cheng. “You’ve been in the same discussions I have. Do you not agree?”

Jiang Cheng's jaw clenched so hard Wei Wuxian wondered if it might actually crack. Finally, he blew out a short breath. "Maybe. Though I don't know what good talking will do when some of those assholes never fucking *listen.* "

Lan Xichen inclined his head in agreement, then looked over towards Lan Wangji, who was standing perfectly still but somehow managing to radiate absolute fury.

"Wei Wuxian does not owe anyone his presence," Lan Wangji replied.

Jiang Yanli looked between the faces surrounding her, clearly distressed. "Can they not just let him recover?"

Jiang Cheng snorted. "They *can* . But they *won't* . They are too full of themselves to give a shit about anyone other than their own little group."

"A group of which you are now a member, Sect Leader Jiang," Wen Qing said sharply. "You have sway with them, if you choose to use it. Both of you do," she replied, sending an equally pointed look at Lan Xichen.

"Rumors grow when not held up to the light," Lan Xichen replied steadily. "The longer Wei Wuxian remains out of sight, the more the rumors will take hold. It is not fair, but it is reality."

Both Jiang Cheng and Lan Wangji drew breaths to disagree, but Wei Wuxian spoke over them.

"Then let's get it over with. It's not like I'm going to be recovered in another day or two. And as much as Zewu Jun is trying to give them the benefit of the doubt, I don't think they'll let anything I say change what rumors they want to believe about me. Let's see if they have the spine to say it to my face. I've only been awake for a day and I'm already tired of it hanging over my head."

Lan Xichen nodded. "I will let the others know. We will reconvene immediately."

Wei Wuxian sighed, feeling exhausted. He didn't have to wait for the meeting to know exactly who the loudest voices against him were going to be. And he didn't need to wait for the meeting to know that absolutely nothing he did or said was going to change their minds. It was all just a huge fucking waste of time.

The murmurs in his head increased, flickers of injustices of the past, wrongs that were not righted, adding weight to Wei Wuxian's own mistrust of the sects and their elders.

He couldn't wait to be recovered enough that he could go back out on his own, away from sect politics and all their associated bullshit. He could feel the heavy gazes of both Jiang Cheng and Lan Wangji, but he didn't turn to face them. They might be supportive of him, at least on this specific issue, but there was nothing they would be able to do about it either.

And all three of them knew it.

To be continued...

A/N - I am in the process of moving over the next month, so I am not sure if I will be able to keep up weekly updates but I will do my best!

Chapter 26: An unexpected ally

A/N - so… I had thought the only thing that was going to delay my writing was getting ready to move but I forgot that my life is actually a dumpster fire and so that made the delay even longer. BUT HERE IS THE CHAPTER FUCKING FINALLY!!!! Thanks to ZazGeek for gently nudging me back to writing, and beta'ing this chapter.

“Wei Ying. Can you walk?” Lan Wangji ignored the fact that his brother was waiting for him to go with him to serve as the Lan delegation to the meeting.

Wei Wuxian would have been lying if he said he felt like getting out of bed at all, much less felt up to going to a sect leader council where he would be judged by a bunch of people who had all the political power and no accountability. They were used to being obeyed, as the most powerful men in the cultivation world.

They were not going to take Wei Wuxian’s show of power lightly. It would be dangerous to show weakness.

“I’m fine. Go with Zewu-Jun. I’ll be there soon.”

Lan Wangji’s eyes narrowed fractionally.

“Lan Zhan. You need to be with your sect. Your voice will carry more weight as a Lan, rather than as the cultivator who stood alongside a demonic cultivator and his undead army.”

Lan Wangji’s jaw tensed, and for a drawn-out moment Wei Wuxian thought he was going to refuse. But there was nothing he could say to refute Wei Wuxian’s statement and eventually, with a tight, almost imperceptible nod, he turned and left with Lan Xichen.

Wei Wuxian closed his eyes briefly, annoyed at himself for being disappointed. It was the right move, and Wei Wuxian was the one who told Lan Wangji to go.

“Are you just going to sleep or are we actually going to do this?” Jiang Cheng’s annoyed voice cut through Wei Wuxian’s thoughts. Jiang Cheng always sounded annoyed when he was nervous. Angry when he was scared.

Wen Qing shot Jiang Cheng a warning glare at the sound of a raised voice in the sick room.

Wei Wuxian opened his eyes and looked at his brother, then his sister. “You should both go. I will be there soon. It’s better if you appear impartial.”

Jiang Cheng looked like he was about to explode, but a tentative voice interrupted him.

“Wei-xiong is right. I mean, I don’t know that much about these things, but it seems like having Sect Leader Jiang already there and setting a few… comments… going, couldn’t hurt?”

Nie Huaisang entered the room, followed by his elder brother. Nie Mingjue gave his younger brother a sharp side-eye, but gave a terse nod.

“Wei Wuxian fought at the request of the Nie sect. We offer the protection of the Nie sect, as no other sect has claimed him,” Nie Mingjue stated in a tone firm enough to have even Jiang Cheng biting back his initial, visceral reaction.

Jiang Yanli gripped her youngest brother’s forearm, holding him steady as she bowed in greeting to the Nie brothers.

“Sect Leader Nie, Nie Huaisang. Thank you for your support of A-Xian.” Jiang Yanli’s voice was soft and gentle, but her use of Wei Wuxian’s nickname established a claim on him that Nie Mingjue’s forcefulness could not erase. They looked at each other for a moment, with a mixture of wariness and respect.

Wei Wuxian felt almost like he was having an out-of-body experience. He had been sect-less for so long, and now two of the major sects were positioning themselves to see who could walk him to a meeting where he was likely to be accused of heretical cultivation.

An accusation that was, in fact, fully accurate. And of all the sects, the Jiang was the one who had been the most weakened by the Wen attack. They couldn’t afford to alienate any of the other major sects.

They could not be seen to be standing by Wei Wuxian until he knew how it was all going to shake out.

“Jiang Cheng,” Wei Wuxian began, but he was cut off.

“Shut *up* ,” Jiang Cheng bit out. “Just shut the fuck up. You’re going to tell me to just leave you here. You’re going to fucking tell me -”

This time it was Wei Wuxian who interrupted. “I’m going to tell you that Nie Mingjue is right. The Jiang sect didn’t ask me to do this. You had no part in what I did. You don’t need to be involved with this.”

Jiang Cheng’s face flushed a bright red, showcasing a level of anger that even Wei Wuxian only rarely provoked. “You..! I don’t need to be fucking *involved* ?! What, you’re going to say that the Jiang were too pathetic to even help in the war? We just were sitting on our thumbs while you came along and saved us all?!”

Jiang Yanli’s fingers tightened on Jiang Cheng’s arm. “A-Cheng.”

Jiang Cheng pulled his arm back from her grip, glaring at Nie Mingjue. “Wei Wuxian was a Jiang before he ever set foot in Qinghe Nie lands.”

“Oh?” Nie Huaisang asked, his fan fluttering nervously in front of his face. “I thought that Sect Leader Jiang had allowed Wei Wuxian’s name to be removed from the sect registry.”

“He was our First Disciple. He’s a Jiang in all the ways that matter. But fine. If you decided you want to be a Nie now, whatever. Do whatever the fuck you want, just like you always do.” Jiang Cheng’s jaw clenched so hard that Wei Wuxian was worried it would crack off before he turned and stormed out of the room.

The silence after his departure was marked by contrast.

Nie Huaisang looked at Wei Wuxian. “Sect Leader Jiang will need many allies. He will realize this. I think.”

Wei Wuxian just snorted skeptically, but Jiang Yanli’s eyes widened slightly as she took in the implications of what Nie Huaisang was saying. “Oh, A-Xian. You should have just told him.”

“He’s not stupid,” Wei Wuxian said, sighing. “He knows it would be risky to stand by me right from the start without knowing how the other sects will react. He just doesn’t *want* to do it this way.”

But Wei Wuxian had learned how to push Jiang Cheng’s buttons long ago, and the best way to get around his prickly pride was to provoke his temper enough that he would act without it.

Wei Wuxian was under no illusions about how the sect leader meeting was going to go. Nie Mingjue and Nie Huaisang were waiting for him.

“Are you sure you don't want me to just meet you there?”

Nie Mingjue’s eyes turned steely. “The Nie know how to honor their allies. You faced the entire Wen army for us. We can help you face a few overly pompous sect leaders.”

Wei Wuxian saw Nie Huaisang’s fan fluttering, eyes shining in admiration of his older brother.

“Besides. Even if they don’t like our stance, what are they going to do, fight us? Even without you, we have the strongest remaining army of any sect now. And with what they just saw you pull off here, they’d be idiots to try.”

Jiang Yanli looked sad, but she bowed to Nie Miingjue. “This one thanks you for looking after Wei Wuxian in the meeting.”

“If you are going to do this, let me help you get ready. I need to check your meridians to see how close you are to being able to draw on your own spiritual power,” Wen Qing spoke briskly, placing a hand on Wei Wuxian’s upper dantian. She gave a quick glance at Nie Mingjue and Nie Huaisang. “You may wait outside. Wei Wuxian will come out when he is ready.”

Wei Wuxian was grateful that Wen Qing did not make Jiang Yanli step outside as well. He would soak up every bit of peace that his *shijie* could give him before he dealt with what was waiting outside the door.

Wen Qing seemed to sense his thoughts. “Wen Ning and I will be called in at some point as well. With Wen Ruohan dead, we speak for the Wen. Though it might serve you better if we didn’t, we will speak for you as well.”

Wei Wuxian gave her a grateful smile. “If they don’t see the worth in your speech, then fuck them.”

Wen Qing gave a soft snort as she clinically moved her hands to continue examining him. “Only a person who can raise an army of undead can afford to make statements like that.”

Wei Wuxian would always be grateful for Wen Qing's ruthlessly dark sense of humor. "Lucky for us I'm so heretical, then."

Wen Qing rolled her eyes, but Wei Wuxian could see the glint of amusement in their depths as she checked his meridians and his lungs and his ribs and declared him sufficiently not dead enough to make the short walk to where the meeting was being held.

"A-Xian. Please be careful," Jiang Yanli said. Her eyes held no fear, no judgement, only worry. He would never understand how he had been lucky enough to ever have someone as amazingly perfect and gentle as Jiang Yanli in his life.

Even Wen Qing's eyes softened when she looked at his sister. But they snapped back to sternness when she turned them on him.

"Let your allies stand for you in this meeting. No matter what happens, do *not* use your spiritual power yet. Your meridians are not cleared enough."

Evidently Wen Qing was just about as optimistic as Wei Wuxian was if she assumed that using his core would be something he had to be warned about.

He flexed his fingers as he considered her words, focusing on the feel of his spiritual pathways. They were not more contaminated with resentful energy than they had been when he finished off Wen Chao. Lan Wangji must have been playing almost continuously for that to be true. The intense pain that had burned through his body when he'd forced the Yin out with his own Yang energy the last time had been no joke. She was probably right about the risks of a repeat performance.

Wen Qing was observing him with narrowed eyes and echoed his thoughts. "Just because you survived your own stupidity once doesn't mean it is a good idea, Wei Wuxian."

Wei Wuxian mentally shrugged. He would only need to draw on his core if he were attacked. And if someone decided to attack him after seeing him create and lead the army that just defeated the entire Wen sect, then they could deal with him using *all* options available to him. And if Yang energy was ruled out, that didn't mean he didn't have other paths open to him.

"How are you feeling?" Jiang Yanli asked. "Are you really up to going to the meeting? Can't they wait a few more days?"

Wei Wuxian's chest seemed to loosen and warm, making him feel safe and cared for in the way he only ever did under his Shijie's gentleness.

"I'm fine, Shijie. Just tired," he added when he saw the skepticism on her face. "But it's better to get this over with. I'll be sitting the entire time anyway."

He hoped. At least with Nie Mingjue standing by him, it should give the smaller sects pause before attacking him outright.

"Hm," Jiang Yanli replied, clearly not believing him but also knowing that pushing further would only make it harder for him. "XianXian needs to go to bed early tonight, then, and get his rest after the grownups have their meeting."

Wei Wuxian felt himself smile as they fell into their familiar rhythm. “Mm. XianXian is only three. He will not stay up too late.”

Jiang Yanli ran a gentle hand through his hair, her eyes wet, then she stood. “He should get ready so he can get to sleep sooner, then. I will come and check on you before bed.”

He smiled at her, hoping it would all work out as she was envisioning. She took her leave, as did Wen Qing so that he could get dressed.

He laid there for a moment, finally alone. Without outside conversation to distract him, he could feel the unrest inside his mind creeping back. He wondered if the murmuring would ever go away, or if the voices of the Burial Mounds would continue to haunt his thoughts with their memories and resentfulness.

His entire body ached, and his breathing was still painful and constricted. But physical pain was something that any halfway decent cultivator had learned how to either push through or compartmentalize away. It wasn’t like the sect leaders were offering him a choice. As a rogue cultivator, his actions would be viewed in a different light than if he were the hero of one of the major sects. The sect leaders all had their own agendas and alliances, and the downfall of the Wen would have opened up a major power vacuum.

Wei Wuxian levered himself from the sick bed and reached for the set of black and red robes laid out by his bedside. They were new and of a much higher quality than he would have ever purchased for himself. He had absolutely no doubt that Lan Wangji was the one who bought them. He mentally added it to the tally of things he owed the Lan Sect Heir. His mind was filled with lists of debts he owed to the people in his life, though the lists were never updated with the things he had done in return.

Those things didn’t matter.

He pulled the soft, red under-robe on, careful of his injuries as he layered on the black outer robe. There were two thick, black bands of fabric that he wrapped around his wrists as arm guards before tying *Suibian* to his belt alongside *Chenqing.*

He could have concealed the flute in his pouch. While it was standard for cultivators to wear their swords to formal occasions, it was not standard to display secondary weapons. If he thought for a moment that any act of etiquette would make a difference in the outcome of the session, he might have taken the time to at least conceal *Chenqing* within his robes.

As it was, he left it hanging from his hip for all to see. He might be sectless, but he wasn’t powerless If they were going to pick a fight with him, he would remind them of exactly who they were fighting with.

Nie Mingjue and Nie Huaisang were waiting for him when he stepped out of the sick room. Both men took in his pallor but steely expression.

“Wei Wuxian,” Nie Mingjue greeted. “I’m glad to see you on your feet.”

Wei Wuxian breathed out a soft snort. “I have a feeling that’s not going to be the general consensus.”

Nie Huaisang's face twisted into a sympathetic grimace before he covered it with his fan.

“Your method was unorthodox, but there’s not a cultivator in that room who isn’t glad to see Wen Ruohan dead and his army destroyed,” Nie Mingjue stated as they began walking towards the inn that had been appropriated as a meeting hall.

Nie Huaisang’s gaze flickered to meet Wei Wuxian for a brief, shared moment of skepticism that any of that would matter.

Wei Wuxian heard the voices around him fall silent, conversations coming to a stand-still as they passed. He did not avoid the gazes of those who watched him. Many with fear. A few with hostility.

He met their gazes, staring at them unflinchingly until they looked away. Their feelings about him were clear. Wei Wuxian was not the hero who had saved them. He was the new nightmare they would warn their children against.

Wei Wuxian felt his lips twist into a half smile. Had he really been expecting a hero’s welcome? No, that would have been foolish.

His mind went back to what Nie Mingjue had said about Wen Ruohan. “Who had the honor of cutting Wen Ruohan down?”.

Nie Mingjue gave a satisfied hum and stroked the hilt of *Baxia* . Wei Wuxian wished he had seen it.

“They are calling you *Yiling Laozu* . Have you heard it yet?” Nie Huaisang asked, clearly amused by the title.

There was no time for Wei Wuxian to respond to *that* , because they had reached the meeting hall. Nie Mingjue did not hesitate to push open the door, not flinching at the abrupt silence that descended on the room when entered.

Wei Wuxian had to use approximately zero percent of his intellect to be able to predict how this was going to play out. The entire Lan contingent, with the exception of Lan Wangji and Lan Xichen, was glaring at him with visible disapproval bordering on hostility. Lan Wangji was watching Wei Wuxian with an intensity that Wei Wuxian wasn’t quite sure how to read. It wasn’t fear, but his gaze seemed to take in every detail of Wei Wuxian’s being, starting with his face and then flowing down over his robes, noticing the weapons that hung at his sides, then returning to his face. But there was no time for Wei Wuxian to wonder about it with the tension in the room nearly a physical thing.

Jiang Cheng watched him with wary eyes where he sat as the only representative from a very visibly weakened YungmengJiang sect. Jin Zixuan was sitting next to him instead of with his father and the rest of the Jin sect, confirming the fact that - despite the gold robes that he wore - he was no longer a part of that sect. In any other circumstance, that act alone would be the main focus of the assembled group, but for now, it was ignored in the shadow of Wei Wuxian’s powers.

Jin Guangshan was sizing him up, his expression assessing, but the rest of the Jin had their usual arrogant sneers on. Wei Wuxian gave the Jin sect leader a smirk. He knew his unexpected army had change what Jin Guangshan had thought was an almost un-losable bet into a disaster. The man would either be out for vengeance or out to make Wei Wuxian an ally when the truth came out.

The Nie saw him enter side-by-side with their sect leader, so he received no glares from their ranks. But they had seen the full extent of the army he had been able to summon, and there was no small amount of wariness in their expressions as they looked at him.

The minor sects had always allied themselves with the clans who had the most money and the most power, so it was not surprising to see their leaders looking at Wei Wuxian with guarded expressions.

"Finally," Jin Guangshan said, irritably. "We have been waiting for nearly an hour."

Jin Zixun snorted in agreement. "Wei Wuxian. Who do you think you are, keeping all the sect leaders waiting?"

Wei Wuxian felt anger surge through him at the fact that the Jin sect was allowed a place of leadership this meeting in the first place, when their sect was just as guilty as the Wen in the war.

His hand clenched around *Chenqing,* but before he could reply, Nie Huaisang had gripped his forearm in warning.

"Who is Wei Wuxian?" Nie Mingjue repeated calmly as he walked over and took his seat where Meng Yao and three elders from the Nie Sect were already sitting. He looked only at Jin Guangshan and ignored Jin Zixun entirely. "He is the one who just fought and won this war while the Jin did nothing but wait for it to be over."

The room went dead silent at the full frontal attack that Nie Mingjue had just unleashed. Nie Husasing tugged on Wei Wuxian's sleeve, leading them both to follow and sit beside Nie Mingjue. Wei Wuxian's movements were slow, as he would much rather remain standing to face the clear hostility in the room, but Nie Huaisang was stronger than he looked and Wei Wuxian was in no physical state to pull back.

He compromised by lounging back on his seat, his legs spread insolently wide as he twirled *Chenqing* lazily in his fingers. He expected a frown of disapproval from Lan Wangji, but the man's face was still unreadable as his eye remained locked on intensely Wei Wuxian.

Wei Wuxian supposed it was better to look as though he were part of the cultivation world, with a place and a literal seat at the table, rather than a supplicant who had to stand before it. Which was likely Nie Huaisang's whole point in dragging him over to the Nie Sect's seats, but Wei Wuxian had no patience for playing these sort of political games. In his experience (Was it his experience? Or was it someone else's? Wei Wuxian could no longer be sure), all it did was delay the inevitable. They would smile politely to your face over the official dinner, then stab you in the back when no one was looking. Jin Guangshan was the biggest grin fucker of all of them. Everyone knew it, but he remained in power due to the sheer size and wealth of his clan.

Wealth that had now been dangerously depleted. Wei Wuxian wondered how many of the leaders in the room were aware of that, and whether it would change the outcome of the meeting.

Jin Guangshan's eyes flashed with anger an instant before a self-effacing smile was pasted on his face. "Sect Leader Nie! Come now. We were all taken by surprise by the Wen attacks. The Unclean Realm and Lotus Pier had the advantage of having been warned in advance." His gaze flickered slightly towards Wei Wuxian. "But Koi Tower received no such courtesy. Had we known, we would have sent more forces with Zixuan to help."

"So you're claiming that you sent Jin Zixuan to help evacuate Lotus Pier?" Wei Wuxian asked sharply.

Jing Guangshan's smile broadened. "Of course. Isn't that right, son?" He looked over to where Jin Zixuan was sitting next to Jiang Cheng. Both Meng Yao and Nie Huaisang's eyes narrowed at the shocked look on Jin Zixuan's face that quickly turned to anger.

Jiang Cheng scowled over at Jin Zixuan, knowing full well that the Jin Sect leader was lying but not sure if Jin Zixuan wanted to have the confrontation out in the open. If anyone could understand the conflict of wanting to remain filial but also knowing what he was being asked to go along with was wrong, it was Jiang Cheng.

"That is a lie," Madam Jin stepped into the room, flanked by her two maids.

"What are you doing here?!" Jin Guangshan snapped, visibly thrown off balance by her presence.

"I am here to find my son. The son you *disowned* when he insisted on honoring our alliance with YunmengJiang and going to Lotus Pier to help bring Yanli to safety when you refused to allow him to bring Jin forces with him. Jin Zixuan acted honorably and courageously to do what was right in supporting the allied fight against then Wen despite your cowardice, and I will not let you diminish his actions now that it is convenient for you to do so."

Madam Jin was not a sect leader, nor officially a sect elder, but no one in the room had forgotten the prowess as a cultivator that she had wielded before her unfortunate arranged marriage to Jin Guangshan.

"Madam," Jin Guangshan said in a condescending tone, his gaze flicking measuringly to the faces of the other sect leaders, who were listening to the exchange with rapt attention. "Surely you knew that was all said in jest. Of course I would not disown my heir."

Madam Jin snorted. "You said that you had enough 'spares' that you didn't have to worry about this one. I am well aware that you have many children that you've left abandoned around. But I have only one child, and I am here to see with my own eyes that he made it through the war safely, despite the fact that the rest of his sect hid like cowards behind the robes of others who did their fighting for them."

Madam Jin turned to address Wei Wuxian, bowing much more politely to him than she had to her husband. "This one gives her thanks, Wei Wuxian, for helping deliver my son to safety."

Wei Wuxian froze, unsure what was happening, but he stood and returned her bow with the appropriate level of deference. The fact that he often chose *not* to use formal manners did not mean he did not know how. His mind raced to try to understand what Madam Jin was doing. Wei Wuxian did not know her personally, but he knew her by reputation and she was no one's

fool. Jin Guangshan had publicly just stated that he had *not* disowned Jin Zixuan. Why would Madam Jin refute that and place her son at risk?

Then it clicked.

Madam Jin knew about her husband's secret alliance with the Wen. She was setting up a clear line of distinction between her son's actions and her husband's, ensuring Jin Zixuan would have a place of leadership and respect even if her husband was brought down. He eyed her with new respect as they both stood from their bows.

She gave him a slight nod in acknowledgement… an ally he had not expected, especially given her close relationship with Madam Yu. She turned and walked not to where her husband sat, but to where Jin Zixuan sat next to Jiang Cheng, a visual show of the split in allegiance.

Jin Guangshan's face was flushed with rage.

"Zixuan. Inform your delusional mother that she is mistaken. Did I not ask you to go and represent the Jin in aiding YunmengJiang?"

Jin Zixuan looked like a deer in the headlights, and Wei Wuxian almost felt bad for him. He was being asked not only to lie in front of the leaders of the cultivation world to save a father that had thrown him out without thought, but he was also being told to denounce his own mother.

Meng Yao spoke from where he was seated by Nie Huaisang. "If Sect Leader Jin believed there was a significant threat, why would he only send young Master Jin and one or two cultivators, rather than a force large enough to actually be able to aid in the fighting? And if it was simply a matter of getting information, would not sending a scout be more effective? Surely the Jin have actual scouts trained."

Jin Guangshan's eyes narrowed as he recognized the speaker (yet another son he had thrown away as inconvenient). There was no way to answer Meng Yao's questions without either looking like a fool or a liar.

"Who are you to speak to Sect Leader Jin?" Jin Zixun sneered. "Are we supposed to take advice from the son of a whore?" He glared at Meng Yao, then over to Wei Wuxian. "Or show gratitude to the son of a servant, who used evil tricks rather than proper cultivation?"

And there it was.

All eyes went to Wei Wuxian. Even the potential split of loyalties in the largest remaining sect was not enough to distract from the abomination that was Wei Wuxian.

"That's right!" Sect Leader Yao blustered, standing and pointing at Wei Wuxian. "What sort of sorcery is he wielding? Sure, he was on our side this time, but what's to stop him from coming after one of us, next?"

Now that you've won their war for them, they don't need you anymore.

Wen Ruohan was a shared threat. When you defeated his army, you took his place as the biggest danger to their power.

Don't trust them.

Wei Wuxian knew these thoughts were not fully his own, but he could find no fault with their logic.

He turned and looked at Sect Leader Yao.

"Are you planning on attacking another clan with no warning? Is the Yao Sect planning on killing innocent civilians? Is that why you're worried?" Wei Wuxian asked, not bothering to keep the mocking disdain from his voice.

Sect Leader Yao blustered something about his own sect's integrity, but Wei Wuxian was already bored of listening to him. The man had a loud mouth but no real power. He turned to find Jin Guangshan's eyes on him again.

"It is always concerning when a rogue, untamed cultivator has such power. With no sect to hold you to accountability, there are concerns. Not to mention that the specific power you used was… unorthodox."

"Heretical," Lan Qiren stated, speaking for the first time since Wei Wuxian had entered the room. Most of the Lan elders nodded in agreement, and Wei Wuxian felt his stomach twist in a way it hadn't when the other sect leaders had reacted against him. Lan Wangji's head snapped towards his uncle, and Wei Wuxian was surprised that Lan Qiren didn't incinerate at the glare directed towards him. Lan Xichen placed a restraining hand on Lan Wangji's shoulder, his face impassive. Guilt stabbed through Wei Wuxian. He was causing a rift between Lan Wangji and not just his sect (which had always been the central core of Lan Wangji's existence) but also with his family. Lan Xichen might not fully agree with his uncle, but he also didn't disagree, either, judging by the way he remained silent during the exchange.

"The Nie have offered Wei Wuxian the protection of our sect," Nie Mingjue said calmly. "It is not the place of other sects to question him."

"The use of demonic cultivation is forbidden," one of the Lan elders pursued. "It damages both the mind and the body, leading to *qi* deviation. The more powerful the cultivator that wields it, the more dangerous they become when they lose control. There has not been a single exception in history. The heretical path must be avoided at all costs."

"All costs?" Nei Huaisang murmured, not loud enough to carry far, but loud enough for his brother to hear. Nie Mingjue took the hint.

"Would the Lan have preferred that Cloud Recesses and the Unclean Realm be burned, then, and all of our cultivators killed by the Wen mercenaries?" Nie Mingjue asked. "We cultivate with our sabres, using the cores of beasts. It is also a path that can affect the mind and the balance of our qi. But we choose this path to protect our people."

"Beast cores are not the same as the heretical path of raising the dead," Lan Qiren said sharply.

"Even if the dead were not already at rest?" Wei Wuxian asked. "Even if they are more at peace now that they've had the chance to avenge their murders? I just put a thousand resentful corpses to rest. How is that heretical? Isn't it better than summoning spirits against their will to answer the questions you force upon them? Isn't it better than allowing them to fester until you have to

destroy them entirely, denying them the chance at rebirth? Tell me, Grandmaster, how my way is evil?"

There was a moment of shock as Wei Wuxian's words and the nature of his questions sunk in. The approach of the Lan sect in communicating with the dead was celebrated and unquestioned, just as the evil nature of Yin cultivation was accepted as black and white truth with no shades of grey. Yet Wei Wuxian stood before them and called all their assumptions into question.

'Wei Wuxian!" Lan Qiren's face twisted with rage as he stood. "How dare you mock our most sacred tenets! How dare you defile not just your own cultivation, but drag others down the dark path with you! You must face punishment!"

"His cultivation should be sealed!" One of the minor sect leaders that Wei Wuxian did not recognize shouted out.

"Yes. We cannot allow such power to go unchecked!" Sect Leader Yao joined in..

Wei Wuxian felt the dark energy surge through him, black mist trickled from *Chenqing*. Lan Wangji stood, shaking off his brother's grasp, but Wei Wuxian barely noticed, the anger flooding his vision.

"Oh? And who gets to decide my punishment? You?" he pointed *Chenqing* at Sect Leader Yao, who visibly flinched back. "Or you?" This time he pointed to Lan Qiren, whose face was still red with anger, but the elder did not respond. Wei Wuxian laughed, darkly. "Do you think you are powerful enough to take my core, or take my life? Do you think I would just let you?"

"Wei Wuxian!" Jiang Cheng shouted angrily, but Wei Wuxian ignored his warning.

"Are you threatening us?" Jin Zixun asked. "How dare you?!"

Wei Wuxian turned to look at Jin Zixun. His eyes glowed red as power seeped from his fingertips. Of course, it was fine for others to threaten him, but he was not allowed to defend himself.

"No one is punishing Wei Wuxian. He acted on my orders," Nie Mingjue's words cut through the escalating fear that had taken over the room.

"You ordered him to raise an army of undead?" Lan Qiren asked.

"I did. The Nie sect has offered its protection to Wei Wuxian. No other sect has the right to interfere."

Wei Wuxian had not expected Nie Mingjue to go this far for him. The Wen sect had been decimated, and the Jiang was little better. The two remaining sects of any consequence were the Jin and the Lan, and both had come out strongly against Wei Wuxian. The Nie sect would be in a precarious position if the Jin and Lan united against them.

Jin Guangshan frowned, stroking his chin. "The Nie sect has made this claim without discussing it with other sects. For something so powerful, there must be some sort of… negotiation."

Evidently, Jin Guangshan's objection was less about Wei Wuxian's method of cultivation, and more about the fact that he did not belong to Jin Guangshan. If the thunderous look on Jiang Cheng's face was any indication, he was reaching the same conclusion.

"Wei Ying is not a spoil of war to be negotiated over," Lan Wangji bit out, glaring at Sect Leader Jin.

"The fact that other sects did not recognize Wei Wuxian for the strengths he had before the war is not the fault of the Nie. We had formed an alliance before the attack was carried out. Any act against Wei Wuxian based on his actions in this war will be considered an act against the Nie," Nei Mingjue said bluntly, glaring around the room. Wei Wuxian could almost feel the hackles of the other sect leaders rise at his provocative tone and words, and he wondered how Nie Mingjue ever managed the diplomatic side of his role as sect leader at all.

Nie Huaisang jumped in, his tone deferential, playing in sharp contrast to his elder brother's. "The Nie asked for assistance. No other sect sent aid. Big Brother is being honorable in repaying that debt, as befits a sect leader."

"Yes. The Wen army had grown significantly in size due to an influx of mercenaries. We would have been caught completely by surprise without the warning that Wei-gongzi provided us. The size of the mercenary force greatly outmatched anything that the Wen sect would have been able to afford without outside aid," Meng Yao said, artfully injecting the specific bit of information regarding the funding of the Wen army to the group.

"Yes," Madam Jin spoke crisply into the brief pause that Meng Yao's words had created. "Let's discuss the funding of the Wen army. I have some documents that may be enlightening on that matter." She reached into her sleeves and pulled out several scrolls.

Jin Guangshan's face went deadly white.

To be continued…

A/N - I hate Jin Guangshan so much.

Chapter 27: A well-organized revenge

A/N -Those of you who follow me on Twitter know that I lost my mother this month, so writing was hard. But I'm feeling better and back on my feet, and I am super excited to get a chapter out before PRIDE month ends. I'm really mad at myself because I had an idea that I was really excited about for the scene that follows this ending scene but I was feeling to tired to write it and now I can't remember what it was. I hope I remember it soon, and I also hope that it doesn't make me wish I'd changed anything in this chapter LOLOL. But it's been a while, so I'm going to post it!

Thanks again to the wonderful ZazGeek for betaing this chapter!

Madam Jin spoke crisply into the brief pause that Meng Yao's words had created. "Let's discuss the funding of the Wen army. I have some documents that may be enlightening on that matter." She reached into her sleeves and pulled out several scrolls.

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But Jin Guangshan had not been a sect leader for as long as he had by cowering from attacks. He drew himself up, glaring down at his wife disdainfully.

"This is a meeting for sect leaders and elders *only* ," Jin Guangshan snapped, his eyes narrowing at Madam Jin before he turned his gaze to the other sect leaders. "There is a reason we only allow members of a certain level to attend these meetings. We need to be able to trust the information and insights provided, not having volatile, emotional interruptions." At the last few words, he waved a bejeweled hand dismissively at his wife.

"Yes. Trustworthiness is an important element, isn't it, Jin Guangshan?" Madam Jin returned, her words sharp as a blade. "That is precisely the reason I believe the topic of the Jin involvement in the Wen's miraculous surge in funding should be examined. Particularly before the spoils of war are divided."

The smaller sects perked up their ears at this. In the past, the Jin had always somehow managed to take the lion's share of any prizes resulting from any dispute that they were party to. Having their share reduced would mean more for the other sects.

Jin Guangshan's eyes flared with rage, but he quickly masked the emotion in another condescending smile.

"Unfortunately for you, madam, the attendance in these sessions is set by the sect leaders. As the Jin sect leader, I did not invite you to this meeting. Your presence is superfluous."

Jiang Cheng stirred. "Madam Jin is sitting with the Jiang, not the Jin."

"What?" Jin Guangshan asked, momentarily unable to hide his shock at being contradicted. Sect leaders typically stayed out of the internal business of other sects, even when it stopped being

strictly ‘internal’. He was not the only one surprised by the young Jiang sect leader stepping into the fray.

“The Nie sect is not the only one who knows how to stand by its allies,” Jiang Cheng said, shooting a glare at Nie Mingue. “Jin Zixuan came to the aid of Lotus Pier when the rest of his sect did not. By his own words, those actions caused him to lose his membership in the Jin. As he clearly did so with Madam Jin’s blessing, she is also welcomed by YunmengJiang and has my protection.”

There was a moment of tense silence as the meaning behind Jiang Cheng’s words sunk in.

“The protection of the Jiang?” One of the smaller sect leaders who was sitting next to Sect Leader Yao scoffed. “What is that even worth now, with your sect all but decimated.”

Wei Wuxian turned his head slowly to look at the man who had spoken, somehow drawing every eye in the room to him despite the casualness of the movement.

“I would advise everyone to remember what happened to the last sect that attacked the Jiang,” Wei Wuxian said, his voice deceptively calm, a razor-sharp blade submerged in still waters, but still clearly visible.

The man who had spoken looked as though he might actually pass out, and Wei Wuxian turned to find Jiang Cheng’s gaze locked on him, his face an intense mix of anger, exasperation, and something so much warmer and deeper that it almost drown Wei Wuxian to see it blazing from Jiang Cheng’s eyes.

Nie Huaisang sighed beside him. His fan fluttered up to his face as he leaned to murmur in Wei Wuxian’s ear. “We’re trying to make it clear you’re not a threat to everyone, Wei-xiong. It would help if you stopped threatening to kill everyone who pisses you off.”

Wei Wuxian slanted a glance over to him, a smirk on his lips as he read the clear amusement in Nie Huaisang’s eyes. “Don’t be jealous, Nie-xiong. I’ll kill anyone who attacks you, too.”

“Well. Now that my presence here is settled, let’s resume the discussion about how the Jin have been secretly funding the Wen army, shall we?” Madam Jin’s brisk voice cut through the tension as she began laying out the detailed evidence that she had brought that would seal Jin Guangshan’s fate.

Wei Wuxian was, in general, not a fan of meetings. But watching the vengeance of the wife that Jin Guangshan had sorely underestimated was worth having to be in the same room as Sect Leader Yao and Lan Qiren.

Every condescension that Jin Guangshan doled out was met with a tight smile and another piece of damning evidence against him. Records of payments to mercenary clans, ledgers showing payments for hiring rogue cultivators to be trained with the Wen army, documentation of meetings with Wen Ruohan as to which tracts of land and portions of treasuries from neighboring sects would belong to the Jin after the war was won.

The level of anger in the room mounted as more and more sects heard about sections of their assets being requested by Jin Guangshan as payment for bankrolling Wen Ruohan’s army. By the

time she got to the execution of all 70 members of the Tingshan He clan at her husband's orders (something that had been blamed on the Wen), the room was in outrage.

Jin Zixuan at first looked pale and horrified at his father's actions and the level of betrayal to the sects he had supposedly been allied with. But as the charges had mounted, Jin Zixuan's expression had turned grim. It was clear that the tide was turning against the Jin Sect, and it was only a matter of time before the other sects fully lumped the entire Jin sect in with the Wen.

There was a time, not too long ago, when Wei Wuxian would have had no problem with that. But Jin Zixuan had saved Wei Wuxian's *shiejie* , and Wei Wuxian was not a man who forgot the debts he owed. Aside from that, he couldn't have his sister marry into a decimated sect.

"It seems there is clear evidence that Jin Guangshan was in bed with Wen Ruohan in the army they sent against the sects," Wei Wuxian said, purposefully avoiding using either man's title. "But it is equally clear that even Jin Guangshan's own son and heir did not know of these plans. The entire sect is not equally guilty of these acts."

Some of the smaller sect leaders grumbled, clearly smelling blood in the water and hoping to catch some of the windfall that might come their way if the Jin sect and all its lands and treasures were divided up against those it had wronged. Discussion broke out amongst both the Jin elders and the rest of the room as tensions mounted. Some even considered war against the Jin as a possible option, with tempers running hot.

Nie Huaisang caught Wei Wuxian's eye, then lifted his fan to conceal his mouth as he leaned over to speak in his elder brother's ear.

Nie Mingjue shot a hard look at Jin Zixuan, then gave a short nod.

"The recourse is clear when a sect leader acts against the interests and without the support of his sect. Jin Zixuan, are you prepared to take accountability for the Jin sect, or does this need to become a matter for the other sects to step in and resolve?" Nie Mingue's words cut across the chatter in the room that had erupted after Wei Wuxian spoke.

Jin Zixuan froze, visibly gathering himself as he drew a breath.

"What?!" Jin Guangshan's face flushed with anger. "Mingjue, how dare you suggest such a thing! Based on the words of a *woman* no less?"

The last trace of internal conflict vanished from Jin Zixuan's face. He drew himself up and turned to look at his father. When he spoke, his voice was calm but unyielding.

"Father. You are no longer fit to be the leader of the Jin sect. Given your actions, I will be taking over as sect leader." He glanced at the elders who were sitting behind his father, their faces carefully blank. They might not have had the nerve to stand up to Jin Guangshan in the past, and some had definitely been of the same mind as their sect leader. They may have been greedy, but they were no fools. They knew the survival of the Jin sect now hinged on taking down Jin Guangshan. "Any objections?" Jin Zixuan asked, making eye contact one by one with each of his sect elders.

One by one, they lowered their eyes and were silent.

Jin Guangshan turned and glared at the group of elders who accompanied him, unable to believe what was happening to him.

“Seize him! Zixuan is a traitor to even his own father! He cannot simply declare himself Sect Leader!” Jin Guangshan bellowed.

The elders all remained stone-faced. The other sect leaders looked on, uncomfortably. The once great leader, elder to every other sect leader in the room, was reduced to something that was almost pitiable.

Almost.

But he missed the mark for being worthy of pity and landed more in the realm of pathetic. There was no sympathy for him to be found in the room.

“Then we are in agreement. As my father is no longer the leader of this sect, and given his actions endangering both the Jin sect and our allies, he will remain imprisoned until we can determine what the final punishment should be.” Jin Zixuan’s voice was steady as he spoke, directing the other members of the Jin sect to restrain and remove a violently protesting Jin Guangshan.

It looked for a moment as though he might break free, but Madam Jin stood and, with a series of hand signs that looked shockingly familiar to Wei Wuxian, she bound Jin Guangshan with a spiritual thread. Wei Wuxian had invented the binding talisman shortly before being expelled from Cloud Recesses. He had been excited and had been showing it off to Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli during one of the days when parents were visiting. He vaguely remembered Jin Zixuan being in a group nearby, his mother standing beside him.

Madam Jin caught Wei Wuxian’s eye as her husband was dragged away by his own sect elders. She gave him a tiny smile. “I’m a quick study when I have a need to be, Wei Wuxian. I thank you for your instruction.”

Wei Wuxian breathed out a shocked but delighted laugh, wondering how long she had been fantasizing about exactly this moment.

Madam Jin bowed to the rest of the assembled leaders. “Now that I have taken care of my housekeeping duties, I will leave you to the rest of your meeting.” She turned to look sternly at her son. “Zixuan. You are seated at the wrong table.”

With that, she swept out of the room.

There was a hush as everyone grappled with what had just happened. Jin Zixuan bowed to Jiang Cheng, then walked over and sat where his father had been seated as the head of the Jin sect.

“Given what has just been revealed, the Jin ask no compensation from the Wen,” he said, immediately reversing his father’s earlier demands that the Jin receive at least a fifth of the territories, being one of the Five Great Sects.

Wen Qing and Wen Ning entered just as he spoke. The brother and sister bowed in unison to the group, everyone’s eyes focused immediately on Wen Qing, recognizing her as the more

dangerous of the two despite many not knowing who she was.

“My name is Wen Qing, and this is my brother, Wen Ning, courtesy name Qionglin. We are the niece and nephew of Wen Ruohan, and sought refuge several months ago in GusuLan after Wen Ruohan destroyed our village and killed our family. We fought against the Wen army that attacked Cloud Recesses during our stay there."

Eyes flickered to the GusuLan delegation, where Lan Qiren gave a terse nod of agreement. If these two had defected from the Wen sect prior to the war, they could not be held accountable for Wen Ruohan’s crimes.

Lan Xichen spoke on their behalf. “Wen Qing and Wen Qionglin fought against Wen Ruohan in defense of Cloud Recesses. Wen Qing is a skilled physician who tended many of our wounded.”

Wen Qing nodded graciously at his words, then continued. “The Nie sect has also offered us refuge, now that we are no longer returning to Cloud Receses.”

There was no mistaking the glare that Lan Wangji shot as both his uncle and Lan Xichen. Only the latter acknowledged it with the smallest tightening of his mouth. Wei Wuxian was likely the only other cultivator to notice, as the rest were focused on Wen Qing as she continued her speech. Wei Wuxian felt a twisting of guilt in his stomach. A-Yuan had been settling in at Cloud Recesses, and now they would have to up-root him. All because they had defended Wei Wuxian.

“Wen Ruohan and his sons are dead. My brother is next in line as Sect Leader for the Wen by birth right. As he has not been raised by Wen Ruohan, and fought against him, I propose that he be instated as the new Sect Leader Wen. As such, he is prepared to offer reparations to the sects who were attacked by our uncle.”

Wei Wuxian might not be able to fix things enough with the Lan Sect elders to get them to allow the Wen siblings and A-Yuan to stay, but he could make sure that everyone knew that Wen Qing and her brother had his protection.

“Wen Qing saved my life when I was attacked by the *Xiangliu* that Wen Ruohan summoned. I am in her debt,” Wei Wuxian stated, knowing full well the majority of men in the room would not be happy with any remnant of the Wen sect to remain.

There was a frozen moment when the other sect leaders and elders in the room tried to evaluate whether it was in their best interests to allow any version of the Wen sect to rebuild, even under a leader that had already stood against Wen Ruohan. The spoils of war would be less if they allowed even the remnants of the sect to survive.

They looked from the steady presence of Lan Xichen, the dark power of Wei Wuxian, and finally to the steely control of Wen Qing. Almost universally, they decided that they would settle for a portion of the Wen empire to be given over as compensation for the war, rather than all of it.

The meeting shifted gears from the dramatic reveal of Jin Guangshan’s self-serving deception into the grinding minutia of arguments over who should get compensated for what and from whom coming out of the war.

Wei Wuxian had no place in this discussion, and wanted nothing better than to return to his bed to rest.

He looked up to find Lan Qiren's judging eyes on him, and he decided it was time for him to leave. He turned towards Nie Huaisang when there was a break as food was brought in.

"It looks like they aren't going to do anything about me for now," Wei Wuxian said. "I guess no one is up to starting another war with the one sect still fully intact."

Nie Huaisang gave him a shrewd look. "I think the invincible undead army had something to do with it as well."

"I don't need to stick around for the rest of this," Wei Wuxian said, standing. He flinched as the stitches Wen Qing had neatly sewn into his chest pulled.

"I'll walk you back," Nie Huaisang said, standing as well.

"I'm fine," Wei Wuxian replied, not wanting to take Nie Huaisang away from his duties.

Nie Huaisang smirked and fluttered his fan. "Of course you are. But this part of the meeting is boring as fuck and you're my ticket out of here."

Nie Mingjue was close enough to hear the exchange, but he didn't do more than glare at his younger brother. Wei Wuxian had the feeling that Nie Mingjue would prefer to be elsewhere as well if it had been at all possible. Meng Yao was already writing down neat, disciplined notes, and all three of them knew who would be the real negotiating power for the Nie sect.

Across the room, Lan Wangji stood and took a step towards him, but Lan Xichen put a hand on his arm. The two brothers spoke briefly through clashing eyes. Lan Qiren spoke sharply to Lan Wangji and spoke, but his words didn't carry through the chatter of the room. Lan Wangji's entire body stiffened at whatever his uncle had said, but he inclined his head in acceptance, then turned and walked over to where Wei Wuxian and Nie Huaisang were standing.

Both Lan Xichen and Lan Qiren watched him go, neither looking pleased, but Lan Qiren, in particular, looked furious. Wei Wuxian felt a mixture of guilt and elation that Lan Wangji was going against his sect's wishes to speak with him. He had grown to enjoy Lan Wangji's company, and was dreading when they would have to part ways and return to their respective, pre-war lives. Wei Wuxian would take any additional hours or days he was able to spend with Lan Wangji, though he worried about the price that the Second Jade would pay given the Lan Sect's reputation for ruthless punishments for even minor acts of disobedience.

After everything Lan Wangji had done for him and the Wen, the last thing Wei Wuxian wanted was to be the source of his losing face with his family and sect.

"Wei Ying. Are you alright?" Lan Wangji asked, his eyes focused on where Wei Wuxian's hand rested on his lower rib cage.

"Ah, Lan Zhan. I'm fine. Wen Qing is too skilled to let me walk around if I wasn't ready. But the meeting is boring and I'd rather do… pretty much anything else than listen to everyone bicker about what price they want to extract from a bunch of dead cultivators."

Lan Wangji did not reply, but he did not disagree, either.

“Wangji!” Lan Qiren’s voice cracked like a whip as he barely refrained from shouting.

Lan Wangji did not turn to acknowledge his uncle’s summons, but his next words reminded Wei Wuxian where Lan Wangji’s first duty lay.

“Rest, Wei Ying. I will find you later. I must stay for the negotiations with Brother and Uncle.”

Wei Wuxian managed a smile and a nod. “Yeah, of course! You have an entire sect that needs you. I’ll catch you later.”

Lan Wangji frowned slightly, but Wei Wuxian didn’t stay to discuss it further.

Nie Huaisang followed him out, and neither man looked back to see the deepening scowl on Lan Wangji’s face as he watched them go.

To be continued...

Chapter 28: Risk assessment

A/N -I'm not quite back to my old pace of updating, but at least it's getting a little better. Thanks again to ZazGeek for beta'ing this chapter!

Mild warning for blood but nothing extreme.

Wei Wuxian felt as though his skin were itching as he walked with Nie Huaisang towards the make-shift medic room where he had been convalescing under Wen Qing's care. Hushed whispers of conversation reached his ears as they walked, with cultivators from every sect awaiting the outcome of the meeting that was taking place inside.

"... Hanguang Jun actually raised his voice to…"

"... never disobeys. Can you imagine someone like him being so unfilial?"

"Do you think they will execute Wei Wuxian for…"

"... Lan Qiren said Wei Wuxian was banned from ever entering Cloud Recesses again after what he did because…"

"... GusuLan is adding a rule forbidding anyone from their sect from speaking to Wei Wuxian…"

".. did you see Madam Jin leave? She looked very pleased. I wonder if her husband is dead."

".. Jin Zixuan was disowned by the Jin Sect for supporting Wei Wuxian…"

"... the Lan sect has always set the standard for the other sect, and if they say…"

".. the Jiang sect threw him out years ago. I wonder if he was practicing demonic cultivation back then?"

"... Madam Yu has been telling everyone who will listen that he's always been nothing but trouble…"

Nie Huaisang snapped his fan open, casting a side-eye to Wei Wuxian.

"I think the laundry women gossip less than these cultivators. You go on ahead. I will give them something better to do."

Wei Wuxian was used to seeing the frivolous side of his friend, but there was a hard note of steel in his voice as he turned towards the nearest group of gossiping cultivators and set them to work in burying the dead. There was a brief argument since many of the dead were Wen, and only some of the cultivators that Nie Huaisang was ordering around were from the Nie Sect, but after a short murmured conversation that Wei Wuxian could not quite hear, the cultivators moved with great haste to obey him.

Wei Wuxian let himself into the room he had been staying in, and gingerly laid down on the bed. He was too tired to remove his shoes or outer robes, and he knew Wen Qing would have things to say about it, but his body was aching and he was so exhausted he could feel his hand tremble.

"A-Xian. Was it that bad, then?" Jiang Yanli's gentle voice came from the other side of the room where she had evidently been awaiting his return. He chided himself for not even having noticed her when he came inside. If she'd been an assassin, she'd have been able to make quick work of the famous demonic cultivator that everyone seemed to fear.

"Mn," he murmured, feeling her gentle fingers card through his hair for a moment before she moved to remove his shoes. "It was better than expected. I walked out on my own two feet."

He wasn't going to think about the fact that Lan Wangji was now banned from even speaking to him. Or that he would no longer be welcome to Cloud Recesses. He tried to pretend he was upset because his supposed 'lifetime pass' to use their library for research was obviously no longer in play.

He heard a soft sound, almost like a growl, and looked up to see a fierce scowl on Jiang Yanli's face. She looked absolutely furious, and Wei Wuxian could not remember ever seeing such a fierce expression on his martial sister's face.

"It's not fair. You saved them. You… you saved all of us! It's only because of what you did that even gives them the luxury of sitting around that table and deciding what to do about you!"

Wei Wuxian blinked, honestly shocked at the words spilling out of her mouth.

"Shijie. I mean… I broke the rules. I've always broken the rules, but this is one of the big ones. I didn't expect them to be happy about it."

Jiang Yanli closed her eyes, visibly gathering herself. "XianXian always takes the punishment without question. No matter how unfair it is." She breathed out a soft, self-calming breath and opened her eyes, which were overflowing with a gentle warmth. "You are too good for all of us, A-Xian. They don't deserve you."

Wei Wuxian clenched his jaw and forced himself to swallow past the lump in his throat. Harsh words and insults were things he had no trouble responding to with a smirk or a blade. But Jiang Yanli's words of love eviscerated him more than if she'd drawn his own sword and run him through with it. Shame and guilt and fear and a million other dark, twisted emotions bubbled up at her gentle words and touch.

"Shijie," he choked out. Then drew a breath and forced his lungs to work. "Don't say things like that. It's… this is just the way things are. For someone like me, I was just lucky to not have died on the streets a long time ago."

Jiang Yanli's small body nearly vibrated with anger. "No! You always say that, A-Xian, but it's not true! You didn't deserve to starve as a child. You didn't deserve to lose your parents. You didn't deserve what… what Mother did. You didn't deserve to have Wen Chao torture you and throw you into -"

Wei Wuxian gripped her wrist, his eyes wide, silently begging her not to continue. As always, his sister knew what he was asking without him needing to give it voice.

They both stared at each other silently, breathing rapidly as though they'd been running.

"Shijie," Wei Wuxian said softly. "It's ok. I'm… it's ok."

The anguished look on her face told him she didn't believe him for a moment, but she allowed the lie to stand.

"Wen Qing left some tea for you. She said to make sure you take it as soon as you got back."

She stood and moved towards the small brazier where the water for the tea was kept hot. Her knuckles were white as she gripped the kettle and poured the hot water over the medicinal herbs that Wen Qing had measured out for her.

Neither spoke as she carefully steeped the brew, then brought it over for Wei Wuxian to drink.

"Thank you," Wei Wuxian murmured as he accepted the cup, hoping she knew it was for much more than just the tea. "And I'm sorry."

Neither mentioned the tear that slid down Jiang Yanli's cheek as she watched her brother drink the tea she'd made for him. The worry and anguish that she'd banished from her expression was still clearly visible in her eyes, but Wei Wuxian didn't know what he could say or do to take it away.

There was nothing either of them could do to stop the other sects from deciding whatever they were going to decide about him. With the support of the Nie, Wei Wuxian likely didn't have to worry about an outright order for his execution, but the level animosity towards him didn't make assassination attempts out of the question.

Or simply banning him from their territories, the way GusuLan had evidently done.

Assassins he could likely handle. And most of his night hunting was done outside of sect territories, anyway. He supposed it wouldn't be too different of a life from what he had been living before. It was likely that the other sect leaders would require it to be supervised, and the village where Wen Ning and Wen Qing had lived had been destroyed by the Xiangliu, so it wasn't like they had a home to go back to. And no one would be comfortable with them taking residence in the Nightless City right away.

Wei Wuxian had already spoken with Nie Huaisang about moving A-Yuan to the Unclean Realms. Wen Ning and Wen Qing might stay there for a while as they decided how to handle the rebuilding of the Wen sect. They would be safe, and he could visit them as much as they would tolerate. And Jiang Cheng seemed like he was open to lifting Wei Wuxian's banishment from Lotus Pier, though it would likely cause issues between Jiang Cheng and Madam Yu if Wei Wuxian actually came for a visit. But that was a separation that Wei Wuxian had grown used to, more or less.

The main difference was that Lan Wangji would not be allowed to accompany him, and Wei Wuxian would not be allowed to go and see Lan Wangji, either. They hadn't been hunting together for an exceptionally long time, but Wei Wuxian would be lying if he said that the thought of never being able to night hunt with Lan Wangji again didn't put a dull weight on his chest.

Of course, Lan Wangji would have many important things to do after the war, anyway. He probably would not have been able to spare the time to go night hunting with random rogue cultivators as much as he had in the past.

Exhaustion overtook him as he slipped into unconsciousness.

Flashes of death, both those he'd wrought as well as those recalled from the undead army he'd led flickered through his mind as he slept, but each time he felt the fist of the nightmare clenching around his chest, it was soothed away by the low, clear sound of a guqin. The spiritual energy that thrummed through him was clear and familiar in its purity. Even in sleep, Wei Wuxian's mind knew he could have complete trust in the person playing. It somehow both soothed and saddened him, but exhaustion claimed him before he could think more about it.

Wei Wuxian woke to the soft sound of the Song of Clarity being played. The room was still shrouded in darkness, the pre-dawn light only beginning to show outside.

"Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian murmured, turning his head to see the man seated next to him. Lan Zhan's gaze lifted from the strings, and Wei Wuxian felt his chest tighten strangely at the focused intensity of the golden eyes on him. Lan Wangji's fingers continued their elegant movements unerringly, without the slightest break in the melody that filled the room. "Have you been here all night?"

Lan Wangji hummed and returned his focus to his instrument as he continued to play, not responding to Wei Wuxian's question. An answer in itself. Wei Wuxian smirked. Lan Zhan would not lie, but he had other ways of withholding information. But the tightness at the corners of Lan Wangji's eyes spoke of weariness, and Wei Wuxian felt his amusement fade. Lan Wangji should not be losing sleep for someone like Wei Wuxian. He had enough burdens to carry already.

"You need to rest. I'm fine. I'm sure they've got you in meetings all day, right? How are you supposed to refrain from running Sect Leader Yao through with Bichen if you aren't rested?"

Lan Wangji's lips curved up slightly. "Mm. Patience is required."

"Lan Zhan!" Wei Wuxian laughed, momentarily delighted at the show of snarkiness.

Lan Wangji finished the last note of the song, letting it resonate through the room before he laid his long, elegant fingers over the strings to still them.

"Wei Ying needs rest more than I."

Wei Wuxian rolled his eyes, levering himself up into a half seated position, propped up on his elbows as he tested his strength. "I'm actually feeling much better. Hanguang-Jun's playing is so amazing!"

Wei Wuxian flexed his hand, glancing quickly around the room to make sure Wen Qing wasn't there. He let a small amount of his spiritual energy out, testing the degree of Yin energy still in his meridians. The burn was almost instantaneous, but it wasn't as bad as what had happened with Wen Chao. In another couple of days, he would probably be fine using his own Yang

energy without risking his pathways. Less, if Lan Wangji kept playing for him, but Wei Wuxian didn't want to be the reason that the Second Jade of GusuLan collapsed from exhaustion.

"Seriously, Lan Zhan. You need to rest."

Lan Wangji shook his head. "There will be meetings starting at breakfast."

Wei Wuxian grimaced. "That sucks. Are the sect leaders close to reaching an agreement?"

Lan Wangji cast Wei Wuxian a look that told him exactly how ridiculous he found that question.

The fog of sleep had faded from Wei Wuxian's mind, and the mention of the meetings reminded him of what he'd heard the day before.

"You, uh, probably aren't supposed to be here, right?" Wei Wuxian asked.

Lan Wangji looked at him calmly.

Wei Wuxian sighed. "Look, Lan Zhan, I appreciate you coming and playing. Really. I mean, it's amazing how much better I feel. But I know your uncle and brother don't approve of it."

"Brother is aware of where I am," Lan Wangji said primly.

"Aware, yes! Approve, no. I heard the rumors, Lan Zhan. I know that your sect has made an entire rule against talking to me. They're already talking about how you raised your voice to your uncle. I don't want you to get in trouble for helping me."

"Gossip is forbidden."

Wei Wuxian could have laughed, if he wasn't feeling so frustrated. "I notice you aren't denying it, though. Lan Zhan, please. I made my choice. I don't want to drag your reputation down with mine."

Lan Wangji's eyes narrowed. "Am I not also allowed to make choices?"

"Yes! I mean, no! I mean… Lan Zhan! I've always been a rule breaker. I've already been thrown out of one sect, what's another one to add to my collection?" Wei Wuxian's smile was bitter, but he pushed the memories down. "But you're *known* for not breaking the rules. You can't… it isn't…"

There was a knock at the door, and Lan Wangji stood as Jiang Yanli entered. They exchanged a greeting that gave the sense this was a prearranged meeting… almost like a changing of the guard.

"I will return to play for Wei Ying when the meeting is over."

"Lan Zhan!" Wei Wuxian's thoughts of his Shijie and Lan Wangji working together to make sure he wasn't alone were disrupted by the recollection of exactly what Lan Wangji was risking by continuing to associate with him.

"Wei Ying will make his choices. I will make mine."

With that, Lan Wangji turned and gracefully left the room. Wei Wuxian fell back against the pillow. “Fuck! That stupid…” Wei Wuxian trailed off, grimacing as he remembered his Shijie was in the room.

“Sorry, Shijie,” Wei Wuxian said as his sister took the seat next to him, her eyes conveying a level of understanding of things that he wished she didn’t perceive in him.

It was true that he could not force Lan Wangji to stay away from him, but hopefully he would be able to talk some sense into him. He would be lying if he said he wasn’t happy that Lan Wangji had decided not to sever their friendship entirely, but doing it here, right in front of all the sect leaders that were clamoring for Wei Wuxian to be punished (including Lan Wangji’s own sect), was just asking for trouble.

Wei Wuxian needed to heal quickly so he could get out of there. Wen Qing had already said she was planning to bring Wen Yuan to the Unclean Realms to visit Wei Wuxian since he was no longer welcome at Lotus Pier. They still had to figure out a long-term plan, but at least he was safe.

Once Wei Wuxian went back to his life as a rogue cultivator, sticking to lands not owned by any of the major sects, people would hopefully focus on other things. The longer he stayed there, a metaphorical burr in their side, the more dangerous it would be not just for him, but also for Lan Zhan.

His next visitor only proved that point more.

Nie Huaisang almost never got directly to the point, which was why it was so disconcerting when he actually did. Jiang Yanli had stepped out to make lunch, and Nie Huaisang had slipped into Wei Wuxian’s room almost immediately.

“They say you have a powerful artifact that let you lead your army,” the Nie Sect Heir said, not bothering with small talk as he sat down in the seat that Lan Wangji had vacated many hours earlier.

Wei Wuxian resisted the urge to lay his hand over his Qiankun bag, where the seal from the sword he’d found inside the Slaughter Tortoise was concealed. Nei Huaisang rolled his eyes.

“Look, I don’t know anything. I don’t need to know anything about it. Even if it existed, and was, say, hidden in your Qiankun pouch that had been levitating by your side during the battle, the one that you always keep with you, I wouldn’t want to try to handle something like that. I’m not crazy or suicidal like you.” Nie Huaisang fluttered his fan in Wei Wuxian’s general direction, as though trying to physically diffuse any ideas about him trying to force the seal from Wei Wuxian.

Wei Wuxian watched him, warily. He liked Nie Huaisang. He even probably trusted him, as much as he trusted anyone who wasn’t his Shijie or Lan Zhan. But the seal was both powerful and dangerous, and Wei Wuxian knew better than to flaunt such an item. Or even admit its existence.

Nei Huaisang’s intelligent eyes studied him from behind his fan for a moment.

“Wei-xiong. I don’t want to take your undead army toy, ok? But the sect leaders are asking about it. They are arguing about whether it should be claimed as a spoil of war, if it exists.”

Wei Wuxian’s lips twisted into a cold smirk. “Am I part of the Wen now? That they think they can claim things from me? Did I miss that someone was somehow able to raise an army that vanquished me?”

Nie Huaisang lifted his hands placatingly. “It’s a feeding frenzy in there. Every sect is trying to grab as much as they can, seeing how far they can push things. You don’t officially belong to a sect, and so they are trying to make you and anything about you fair game. I think it’s stupid. Da-ge thinks it’s stupid. But there are a lot of people who are really freaked the fuck out right now.”

Wei Wuxian knew this already from the fearful and hostile looks that had been thrown his way as he’d walked to the sect leaders’ meeting the day before.

“So what do you want me to do about it?”

Nie Huaisang sighed. “Just… if anything exists. Not that I think it does. But *if*. *If* it did, hypothetically, exist, then I would tell you not to admit that fact to anyone. No one has actually seen anything. Da-ge and I can keep it from going too far as long as they can’t prove either way that you have it.”

Wei Wuxian considered his friend’s words for a moment. The Nie sect had gone out on a ledge for him already. If the other sects thought that the Nie were acquiring a powerful artifact through him, it would affect how they divided the ‘rest’ of the spoils of the war, at best. At worst, they might start to view the Nie as a threat. Wei Wuxian didn’t want that to happen because of him. Nie Huaisang wasn’t asking him to do anything that he hadn’t been already planning to do.

Wei Wuxian shrugged. “What artifact?”

Nie Huaisang let out a relieved sigh. “I don’t know. I really don’t know. Like you said, what artifact? I certainly never saw anything.”

At the sound of Jiang Yanli returning with lunch, Nie Huaisang stood, smoothing out his expensive robes. “I need to return to the meeting. But…,” he paused, looking back at the door. “Fear makes people foolish. If there are people who believe that you have… something… and that you are currently weakened…” Nie Huaisang let his voice trail off, the implication obvious.

“I will watch my back.”

Nie Huaisang nodded, glancing over at Jiang Yanli and the servant who was helping her set up the lunch tray. He leaned forward, speaking softly so his voice did not carry.

“If I post a guard at the door, it will increase the suspicion. I will send someone here under the guise of watching Wen Qing and Wen Ning, but that will only be while they are not in the meeting with us. During the daytime, you will be on your own.”

Wei Wuxian nodded. Living as a rogue cultivator, he was used to having to watch out for himself. It wasn’t anything new. It really didn’t matter how many people came after him. He was

more than capable of taking care of himself. But the last thing he wanted was to be the cause of another war. He needed to leave as soon as possible. Another day, at most.

“As soon as you’re recovered enough to travel, it might be better if you finished your convalescence in the Unclean Realm.”

Wei Wuxian gave another nod of acknowledgement, if not agreement. The expression on Nie Huaisang’s face said that he hadn’t missed this fact. But Wei Wuxian really didn’t have much of a plan for what he would do next. The dust hadn’t yet settled with the post-war negotiations, and he didn’t know what it would mean if he joined the Nie sect, or just was an ‘associated’ rogue cultivator to them.

All he knew was that there was an itch between his shoulder blades telling him that staying in the sick room next to a large number of cultivators that viewed him as an imminent threat was not something he wanted to continue doing.

But Jiang Yanli was pouring him the tea that Wen Qing had told her to make sure he took with his lunch, and Wei Wuxian allowed himself to focus on just the current moment, enjoying the soothing warmth of her presence while he could.

Wei Wuxian had set wards up when he felt himself feeling drowsy from the tea that Wen Qing had left for him. They triggered shortly before dinner, and the two second warning they provided was what kept Jiang Yanli alive.

He hadn’t even processed it before his qi was flooding his pathways, burning the residual Yin energy out as he grabbed *Suibian* from the night stand and threw it at the cultivator who had just reached Jiang Yanli, his blade drawn and pointed towards her throat

He died with *Suibian* pierced through his heart, but he fell forward, and Jiang Yanli had to quickly deflect the man’s blade before it achieved its aim even with its master dead.

Blood welled from the cut along her forearm and the palm of her hand.

Wei Wuxian felt his mind go dark and hazy at the sight of his sister’s blood, even as five more cultivators came through the door. Their shocked expressions upon seeing him awake made it clear they were not here to help.

The dark, churning anger inside him manifested into black smoke that curled from his pores, even as *Suibian* returned to his outstretched hand when he summoned it. His body felt like it was burning up, and he could hear his sister shouting for him, but all he could see was her blood on the sword of a cultivator who had been coming for *him.*

The images around him became disjointed, and suddenly there was blood everywhere, the bodies of the six assassins strewn about the room. He could not hear anything beyond the voices in his head and the pounding of his own blood in his ears, but he felt a gentle pressure on his face.

“ *A-Xian* ! A-Xian, please. You need to stop. It’s ok. I’m ok. Please, A-Xian. Look at me.” Jiang Yanli’s pleading voice slowly penetrated the fog swirling around him (inside him? He wasn’t sure. Everything was blurry. Only the feral need to kill anyone who drew a sword against Shijie was clear.). Her eyes were wide and frantic; tears streaked her face.

“A-Xian. You’re going to damage your golden core. You’re drawing on the resentful energy while using *Suibian.* Wen Qing warned you what could happen. Please. You killed them all. I’m safe. You saved me. But please don’t hurt yourself more.”

Wei Wuxian blinked, becoming more and more aware of the searing burn flooding through his body. Jiang Yanli was right. Wei Wuxian could feel the resentful energy thrumming through some of his meridians, but his core was also engaged. He could feel his own qi flowing, his middle and lower dantians flooding his system with his own Yang energy. Miraculously, he had channeled the resentful energy only on the peripheries of his meridians, keeping it instinctively away from his core, but it was not sustainable at this level, and not without a high degree of focus and control, neither of which he currently had.

“Shijie,” he began, not sure what to do. They were not safe. The cultivators were wearing red Wen outer robes, but Wei Wuxian could easily see the gold of the Jin sect robes several wore beneath, and one had the white robes of the Lan. Evidently they had been quiet in their entry, and met their deaths quickly and equally quietly because he did not hear the sound of an alarm being raised outside. But it was extremely unlikely that they acted alone, and - soon - someone would notice that they failed to return from their mission.

His sister could not stay here, and she was not safe going back with Jin Zixuan if members of his own sect were willing to kill her to get to Wei Wuxian. Additionally, the sect leaders would blame him for killing their cultivators, even if they had come to attack him.

Wei Wuxian was already viewed as a threat. He’d just proven their point.

They had to leave.

“Are you ok?” he managed to ask, taking her bloody hands in his.

She nodded. “It’s just a minor cut. I’ve had worse in the kitchens. Please. You need to breathe.”

Wei Wuxian tried, he really did, but he could feel the resentful energy spreading further through his meridians, increasingly painful and destructive as it collided with more of his qi.

Jiang Yanli’s eyes were filled with fear, but it was fear *for* him, not *of* him. She pulled something from her pocket.

“Wen Guniang showed me, in case this happened…” Without wasting more words, she pushed three needles into three points on Wei Wuxian’s neck, sealing the majority of Wei Wuxian’s meridians. The flow of resentful energy ceased instantly. His own qi was somewhat blocked, but not entirely. Wen Qing would have been able to seal him down entirely, but this actually worked out better. It stalled the mixing of yin and yang energy in his body, but didn’t leave him entirely helpless.

“We need to leave. It isn’t safe,” Wei Wuxian said, fighting the dizziness and disorientation that was making it hard to even stand upright with his qi so out of balance.

Jiang Yanli nodded, and he didn’t waste more time. He grabbed his pouch, while she gathered some items from the table Wen Qing had been using as a desk. It had been years since they’d flown tandem together, but she didn’t hesitate to mount *Suibian* with him. He felt the strain of it,

with less than full access to his core, but he breathed through it and forced as much qi as he could through his meridians that were still flowing, and steadied his sword.

It would have been better if it had been full dark, or if he had been able to use resentful energy to cloak them in shadows. The only thing they had going for them was that the building they were in was not close to the hall where the meeting was occurring, and most people were staying close to where the action was happening. This was probably why the attackers didn't do much to disguise their entrance, clearly assuming Wei Wuxian would be asleep or at least too weak to react fast enough to stop them.

They crouched low together, flying out a window in the rear of the building. Wei Wuxian ignored the pain that spiked through his body, and forced his shaking hands to steady themselves as he held his sister on his sword. His first priority was to get her somewhere safe. He would deal with whatever damage that happened to his body later.

To be continued...

A/N: Ok, but before you yell at me I really wanted to find a way to stop writing group scenes. Now we have an excuse for wwx and lwj to be alone????

Separately, I am trying my first thread fic on Twitter here. I think I might be too wordy/descriptive of a writer for this to work, but if you want to check it out please do! It's an arranged/political engagement between lwj and wwx (so their first meeting is AFTER they are betrothed). My thought was that lwj would not be much better than jzx when it came to this.

Chapter 29: Separate paths to safety

A/N -Ok, so I only missed the 2 week update goal I'd given myself by a day, so this is improving! Thank you to ZazGeek for their gentle nudges and reading ths over. Next chapters will continue to build on Wei Wuxian's... everything... about Lan Wangji. Hope you all are safe and healthy.

Wei Wuxian had planned to take them all the way to the Unclean Realm, but he didn't make it. Not only was his qi partially blocked, but it was also unstable. His whole body was shaking with the effort of keeping his sword above the treeline as they flew north. They had been traveling for hours, but still had more than an hour to go before they reached the safety of the walls of the Unclean Realm.

"A-Xian. Look! There's a house. We can rest." Jiang Yanli pointed to something to their left.

Wei Wuxian's vision was blurry with fatigue, but he trusted his sister and flew in the direction she pointed. There was a small clearing, with an even smaller, abandoned structure on its edge. To call it a house was generous, but it was shelter, and far enough away from any sort of village that they would be able to rest without much chance of being discovered.

They had barely made it through the door before Wei Wuxian's vision began to blur. He stumbled, and felt Jiang Yanli's small hands grip his shoulders with a strength that only her brothers understood as she helped keep him from falling.

"A-Xian!"

"I need to… set… the wards…," he began, but everything faded to black before he could actually accomplish it.

He had a vague sense of a cool cloth being placed on his head, and someone pouring a bitter liquid into his mouth, but he couldn't focus his mind on the softly spoken words enough to make out their meaning. But he recognized the soothing tone of his Shijie's voice, and the soft lotus scent of her hair, and allowed himself to fall back to a restless sleep. His dreams were filled with an amorphous sense of danger, the uneasy feeling that there was something he needed to be doing, and images of deaths that were not his own.

Wei Wuxian wasn't sure how much time had passed, and somewhere in the back of his mind that worried him, but the thought didn't fully surface. The intense feeling of unease that had been plaguing him had lessened, inexplicably. A subtle sandalwood scent had joined the lingering lotus fragrance, giving him an odd feeling of safety that he couldn't explain.

He could hear people speaking, and Wei Wuxian forced his mind to focus. The memory of what had led him to his current predicament surged into his consciousness, specifically that a cultivator had had his sword at Jiang Yanli's throat.

“Shijie!” he gasped hoarsely, forcing himself to sit up and open his eyes. How long had he been incapacitated? Was his sister safe? Had he failed to protect her?

“Wei Ying.”

“A-Xian!”

Wei Wuxian felt the panic in his chest recede as he saw both Lan Wangji and Jiang Yanli on the other side of the tiny room, where they had been conversing quietly together. Wei Wuxian lay on a straw mattress on the floor of a small, abandoned cottage. Their wasn’t much furniture, just a broken chair, a small table that had been recently cleaned and now held medical supplies, and a crudely hewn bench of some sort. The building itself was in a state of disuse, with loose boards on the flooring and a gap in the wall that let the chilly night air in.

He realized they must still be in the shack Jiang Yanli had seen as they had been flying towards Qinghe.

“Shijie,” Wei Wuxian said, relieved to see her looking well, if tired. She knelt down by his side and pressed her cool hand to his forehead.

“A-Xian. How do you feel?”

“Alive?” His gaze shifted to Lan Wangji, standing behind his sister, his face drawn and tense. “Lan Zhan. I didn’t set the wards. Are we… did anyone else find us?”

“No. I am here. You do not need to try to keep watch,” Lan Wangji said, calmly.

Jiang Yanli looked up at Lan Wangji, then stood, stepping aside to make room for him beside Wei Wuxian’s bed. “I’ll brew some tea.”

Lan Wangji gracefully knelt down beside Wei Wuxian’s bed on the floor. His movements were calm and unhurried, and Wei Wuxian felt some of the tension leave his body.

He had spent years on his own since being banished from the Jiang sect, and even before then, it was always his job to protect the Jiang, not the other way around. It was… comforting… to have someone like Lan Wangji looking out for him and Jiang Yanli, even if it was only for the night. Wei Wuxian did not trust easily - life had taught him too well - but he knew without question that he could rely Lan Wangji, both to have the integrity to keep his word, and the cultivation prowess to actually back it up.

It struck him, in that moment, how completely he trusted the pristinely robed man kneeling beside his bed. Lan Wangji might have hated him when they were younger (and Wei Wuxian would be the first to admit he had deserved it), but he had grown into a man so honorable that he overlooked his personal feelings from the past and stepped in to do what was right.

Lan Zhan was just so… so *good.* He was the *best* and he was here, helping Wei Ying.

“Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian breathed out, not even sure what he wanted to say. He was so exhausted, still not fully recovered from his injuries during the war, and then having to take his sister and flee with most of his qi blocked. His thoughts were muddled, and his emotions even more so. His voice was not quite steady, and his face might have been doing something as well,

based on the way Jiang Yanli's cheeks pinkened where she stood to make some of the medicinal tea. "Thank you for looking for us."

"There is no need for thank you's between us," Lan Wangji said.

Wei Wuxian didn't know how to respond. Of course he owed Lan Wangji for helping to keep Jiang Yanli safe! And everything that Lan Wangji had done for him, putting himself at odds with his sect when he had spent his *entire life* working ceaselessly to embody the Lan sect rules and values. It was so much. It was too much… way more than Wei Wuxian deserved.

Lan Wangji leaned forward and pressed his fingers against Wei Wuxian's middle dantian. Wei Wuxian immediately felt the pure, cool flow of Lan Wangji's qi entering his body. He closed his eyes briefly, feeling his own qi respond, smoothing out ripples and eddies inside him that he hadn't even registered before Lan Wangji stilled them.

Wei Wuxian closed his eyes, feeling of Lan Wangji's qi flow through his body. It felt so pure and steady. How could something so strong feel so gentle? He wondered if Lan Wangji was able to feel his own chaotic qi. Did it bother him? Or did he enjoy the feeling of making order out of chaos?

He floated for a while on the sensation, unconsciously matching his breathing to that of the man beside him. He could feel his own qi flowing smoothly now, with no constrictions or pain. It was the absence of pain that had his eyes opening again as he remembered the needles that Jiang Yanli had used to block his qi when he had drawn in too much Yin energy and was in danger of burning out his meridians as he had been channeling his own Yang energy at the same time. He reached up, feeling the back of his neck, but they were gone, explaining why his qi was able to flow. But it didn't explain how his meridians had been cleared of the Yin energy.

Jiang Yanli must have seen his abrupt movement, because she appeared by his side, smoothing the hair back from his forehead.

"A-Xian. It's ok. When Wen Guniang had told me about this technique, she had warned me to take them out as soon as resentful energy dissipated. You were not able to heal properly with your qi restricted. She hadn't yet taught me how to tell when it was dissipated enough to be safe, or how to speed the process." Jiang Yanli bit her lip, her voice shaking. "You weren't… you weren't waking up and I did not know how to help."

Wei Wuxian opened his mouth to reassure his sister that she had been *amazing* at learning so much so fast, but Lan Wangji, shockingly, spoke first.

"Jiang Guniang saved Wei Ying. This one is grateful." Lan Wangji did not pause in passing spiritual energy to Wei Wuxian, but his tone conveyed the sincerity of his words.

Jiang Yanli lowered her eyes, looking flustered at the praise of someone as powerful as Lan Wangji.

"This one is grateful to Hanguang-Jun, He was able to tell whether your meridians were cleared enough for the needles to be removed." Jiang Yanli looked at Wei Wuxian, relief clear in her expression. "You should recover much more quickly now."

“Shijie. Thank you. You saved me with your quick thinking. And quick needles! What am I going to do if you and Wen Qing gang up and bully me together!” She smiled tremulously, still obviously frustrated with her lack of training. “Don’t worry. Look, hopefully we won’t have to deal with something like this again.”

Jiang Yanli’s lips firmed, and she met Wei Wuxian’s gaze head on. “We can’t know that you won’t be pushed into needing to use resentful energy again. I want…,” she seemed to hesitate, then she straightened her spine and lifted her chin slightly. “I want to learn how to heal A-Xian. I want to understand how to tell where the resentful energy is in your system.”

Wei Wuxian froze. Resentful energy was *forbidden* , and even the thought of his Shijie getting anywhere near it made him want to scream, sending a knot of terror in his stomach.

“Shijie, please, you can’t’,” he began, but his sister, shockingly, cut him off.

“I can. I watched Lotus Pier be burned to the ground, and I could not fight. My father died, and I could not save him. People came to kill me, to kill my little brother, and all I could do was stand there or run. I am tired of feeling helpless, A-Xian. You, of all people, know what that feels like, how impossible it is to bear. If A-Xian can take all the resentment inside him to help save us, then his big sister can learn to help to heal him. I want to learn. Please, A-Xian. Let me learn how to help save my little brother.”

She looked at Wei Wuxian with wide, pleading eyes, and Wei Wuxian could no more reach up and pull down a star than he could refuse her.

“Ok, Shijie. Ok. We’ll… we’ll find a way. But right now, it’s not safe to stay here.”

“Wen Qing will be staying at the Unclean Realm,” Lan Wangji replied. “She has likely already arrived.”

Jiang Yanli drew a slow breath at the reminder that she was temporarily a refugee, until they found out who was behind the assassination attempts, and whether she was truly just in the way or an actual target.

Wei Wuxian forced a smile, feeling the guilt churn in his stomach at the fact that he’d not only put his sister in danger and drawn her down his own dangerous path, but now would be keeping her from her betrothed. Still, they couldn’t risk letting her go back to Koi Tower when so many of the robes hidden beneath the Wen uniform were gold.

All he could do was nod. Actually, Jiang Yanli apprenticing under Wen Qing might not be a bad thing. Any assassin that went for the infamous doctor from the Wen sect would quickly realize they had made a fatal error in judgement. Wen Qing had not survived Wen Ruohan’s court by accident. The assassination attempt might inadvertantly give Jiang Yanli a chance she would never have otherwise had to learn skills that would keep her safe.

“If you want to learn about medicine, there’s no one better than Wen Qing. She can also teach you how to defend yourself.”

But first, they needed to safely get her to the Unclean Realm, and Wei Wuxian was not yet in a physical state to make that happen on his own. He needed to find out how safe their current hiding spot was.

“Lan Zhan. How did you find us?”

“When you did not arrive in the Unclean Realm, Nie Huaisang gave me a list of possible places you could have sought shelter on the way there, if you were injured in… the attack.”

Lan Wangji’s voice went cold, the last words bitten out of his mouth in uncharacteristic anger. Wei Wuxian had not been cognizant when Lan Wangji had arrived, but it was likely he had had time to speak with Jiang Yanli about the details of the attack.

Nie Huaisang might know these lands better than most, but others would be able to figure it out soon enough. They could not afford to stay much longer.

“Yeah. We probably don’t have much time before other people figure it out as well. What do you know about the attack? Anyone step up to claim responsibility for the assassins they sent against me and my *sister* ?” Wei Wuxian couldn’t keep the darkness from rippling out of him at the thought of the Jin cultivator’s blade pointed at his sister’s throat.

Lan Wangji’s jaw tensed, his lips tightening into a thin, flat line.

“Ah. Of course,” Wei Wuxian said, bitterly. “I’m sure they are trying to claim it was not an attack on me. That I… what, that I just randomly dragged in a bunch of cultivators, dressed them up in Wen robes, then killed them for fun?”

“Their story is… evolving,” Lan Wangji said tightly.

Jiang Yanli’s delicate hands clenched into fists. “I have written a detailed account of exactly what happened. Zixuan will believe me. We will not let them cover this up, or use their own attack to discredit you.”

Wei Wuxian’s lips twisted into a hollow smile. None of this was a surprise, but it still settled bitterly in his stomach. He wasn’t entirely without allies, though. If someone had told him a year ago he would put any faith at all in Jin Zixuan to do what was right, he would have laughed in their face. Jin Zixuan had never been as awful as Jin Zixun, but he hadn’t stood against his cousin, either.

Evidently, Jiang Yanli had changed that, somehow. Wei Wuxian would have to wait and see what the man did about the members of his sect who had just tried to kill his betrothed, even if it was only as a bi-product of her being in the same room as Wei Wuxian.

“Not all of the attackers were Jin, though.” Wei Wuxian turned his gaze to look steadily at Lan Wangji.

Wei Wuxian wasn’t sure how Lan Wangji managed to convey such absolute fury without any discernible change to his facial expression.

“Brother and Uncle are investigating.”

Wei Wuxian snorted out a hollow laugh. “Yeah. I’m sure they’ll search extremely hard.”

Wei Wuxian had expected his words to provoke anger in the Second Jade of GusuLan, given his well-known, unwavering loyalty to his sect and his clan elders. Instead, he was met with a calm,

golden gaze.

“Uncle may not approve of Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji began, earning another huffed laugh from Wei Wuxian at the understatement. “But Uncle is no fool. He and Brother both saw the room where you had been attacked. There is only one way to interpret the evidence. Both Uncle and Brother agreed, it was an assassination attempt, unsanctioned by GusuLan. If there are any other disciples of our sect involved, they will be found and punished.”

Wei Wuxian was not sure he had ever heard Lan Wangji say so many words at once before, outside of a class lecture session. He would have made a joke about it, but Lan Wangji was so earnest and serious about it that Wei Wuxian didn’t have the heart to tease.

He wasn’t sure if Lan Wangji’s read on his uncle and brother was accurate or wishful thinking, but it made Wei Wuxian realize again how unworthy all of them were to have Lan Wangji as their defender. Wei Wuxian was fully aware that he, himself, was even less worthy than Lan Wangji’s sect, but here they somehow all were, with Lan Wangji standing for all of them.

“Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian said. “Who was the Lan disciple that I… that came for me, anyway?”

Lan Wangji’s face hardened. “He was a relatively new disciple. Not particularly strong, and not known for thinking or acting on his own.”

Wei Wuxian hummed thoughtfully. “So he was unlikely to act on his own. What of the Jin?”

“Jin Zixun was one of the cultivators in the group who attacked Wei Ying.”

Wei Wuxian grimaced. No matter what Jin Zixun had done to start things, Wei Wuxian was always blamed for the outcome of their arguments for the simple reason that Jin Zixun was a blood relation to a sect leader but Wei Wuxian was the son of a servant. The fact that Wei Wuxian had killed Jin Zixun would make things much harder for Jin Zixuan, regardless of circumstance.

Wei Wuxian looked over to where Jiang Yanli was standing quietly. None of this seemed to be new information for her, so she and Lan Wangji must have discussed it when he had first arrived.

“So how are they trying to spin this, if the attack was so obvious?” Wei Wuxian asked.

“The seal. They claim the group only went there to check to see if there was a weapon in your belongings, and that you must have attacked them to protect it,” Lan Wangji said. His gaze also shifted to Wei Wuxian’s pouch. Of course, it would have been extremely unlikely that Lan Wangji wouldn’t have noticed it, being right next to Wei Wuxian during the battle. If nothing else, he would have *felt* it with the degree of resentful energy it carried.

But Lan Wangji had not spoken up about it to anyone, not even his own Brother.

Still, it wouldn’t keep others from speculating.

“Shijie isn’t safe with me,” Wei Wuxian said, realizing it with a sudden certainty. “If they believe there is something they can steal and use for their own gain, they will keep coming for it until they either prove that it doesn’t exist or take it.”

Jianng Yanli's face paled, and she drew in a breath, likely to object but Wei Wuxian continued speaking before she could.

"Shijie. You already helped me. I'm better now. All I need is to rest a little, and I'll be fine. But if I am worried about you, I won't be able to focus on anyone who comes for me."

Jiang Yanli's lips trembled at the stark truth of his words, and Wei Wuxian felt guilt wash over him. He knew that his Shijie felt useless because she had never been trained to cultivate the way her brothers had, partially due to her frail health but partially due to her parent's focus on Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng.

"Lan Zhan will take you to apprentice with Wen Qing." Lan Wangji stiffened at his words, but Wei Wuxian kept going. He needed to get them both away from him. What if more Lan disciples came, and Lan Wangji had to be the ones to kill members of his own sect for Wei Wuxian? No. They needed to leave.

"She is one of the scariest people I know, Shijie. You'll learn from her, and then you'll come and you'll kick everyone's ass in the Jin sect who dares to bully your XianXian, or does anything annoying to your Peacock. But for right now, I need to just make sure you're safe behind the walls in the Unclean Realm."

Jiang Yanli held completely still for a moment, then gave a small nod. "Then I will."

Ruthlessly, Wei Wuxian turned to Lan Wangji. "Lan Zhan. You said you would help me. Nothing would help me more than getting my sister to safety, inside the walls of the Unclean Realm. Will you help me, Lan Zhan?"

"I will take you both," Lan Zhan said tightly. Implacably.

Wei Wuxian gave a small smile.

"Lan Zhan. Always so good, trying to help everyone he comes across. But it is too dangerous for you to carry both of us on your sword. Your core is stronger than anyone's I know, but even you will have to take multiple rests to fly two people all the way to Unclean Realm. We'll be more visible in the sky than I will on the ground. More vulnerable to attack. Everyone knows that Nie Mingue offered me the protection of his sect. Unless they want war with the Nie, they will try to take me out before I get there. They'll be watching for me. I can't go to the Unclean Realm right now. But if you take only Shijie, you will be there in a matter of hours. They won't attack Hanguang Jun."

"Then I will take you both back to Gusu," Lan Wangji replied firmly, but not in his usual calm, pedantic tone. His words were rushed and he seemed almost… panicked?

But that made no sense. The points Wei Wuxian had made were all valid. Surely Lan Wangji would realize that separating was the safest option for everyone. Or, well… the safest option for Jiang Yanli and Lan Wangji at least. Lan Wangji had made a name for himself by protecting the innocents, and who could be more innocent than Jiang Yanli? Surely that would be Lan Wangji's priority, just as it was Wei Wuxian's. Wei Wuxian was not sure if there were really any safe options for himself at this point, but that was fine. He was used to it. In any case, going back to Gusu where the sect elders likely wanted him executed was not high on his list of options to try.

“Lan Zhan. Are you joking? Why would I want go back to Gusu?”

Lan Wangji’s face closed off, and Wei Wuxian realized he probably offended him. Despite their own rule against pridefulness, the Lan were known for viewing their sect as superior to others in many ways.

“Listen. Cloud Recesses is four times as far a journey as the Unclean Realm. We need to get Shijie to safety right away. And Wen Qing is in the Unclean Realm now.” He tactfully didn’t say ‘and she’s there because your uncle threatened her. Lan Wangji had enough to deal with. “Even aside from that, your sect has already banned me, and I’m not really looking forward to being whipped to death, or whatever they decide I deserve for cultivating resentful energy.”

“They will not harm Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji said, vehemently. He stood, body tense, and Wei Wuxian thought that - had Lan Wangji be a man of lesser control like everyone else - he would have been pacing in his frustration. As it was, he simply stood, body taut and still with a terrible tension, as he looked down at Wei Wuxian with burning eyes and a promise that even Wei Wuxian knew would be impossible to keep.

Surely Lan Wangji knew it, too.

Wei Wuxian didn’t really know how to respond. It was clear that Lan Wangji felt responsible… wanted to help Wei Wuxian. He supposed that was natural for comrades in arms, a certain feeling of closeness and loyalty that came from experiencing life or death situations with someone. Wei Wuxian definitely had his own fantasies about staying and fighting by Lan Wangji’s side, finding a little cottage like the one they were in, away from sects and politics and assassins and just night hunting together. Just the two of them. Best friends, with no differences in station or reputation to keep them apart.

But even Wei Wuxian knew that was just a daydream. Who wouldn’t want to spend their life in the presence of someone like Lan Wangji? Everyone, probably. But Lan Wangji was the heir to GusuLan and he had duties to his sect, to the entire cultivation world. Wei Wuxian was neither so foolish nor selfish to ask for such an impossible thing.

“Lan Zhan. Your sect might be willing to investigate the attack on me, but your uncle hates me and your brother will defer to him, no matter what he feels. You’re not the sect leader. You will not be able to stop what they decide to do. All that will happen is it will cause a rift between you and your sect, and I don’t want to be responsible for that. You are Hanguang-Jun, the Second Jade of GusuLan. You can’t throw it all away for some random rogue cultivator that fucked up and got in trouble.”

Lan Wangji looked… stricken, was the only word that Wei Wuxian could come up with, even though it was expressed through only the man’s eyes. Wei Wuxian felt guilt flood through him again. All he ever seemed to do was fuck things up, both for himself and for everyone he touched. Lan Wangji was used to being able to help the people he had given his word to, and Wei Wuxian was here breaking his perfect winning streak. But he had to know that it was not Lan Wangji’s fault that Wei Wuxian had gotten himself into such an impossible situation. Wei Wuxian couldn’t bear the thought of Lan Zhan being upset because of him.

He also couldn’t bear what might happen to his sister if Lan Wangji didn’t prioritize her safety over Wei Wuxian’s.

“Lan Zhan.” Wei Wuxian said, levering himself up off the bed to kneel at Lan Wangji’s feet. “Please get my Shijie to safety. That is all that matters. I will be fine. A single, moving target is harder to hit. We don’t have much time and my qi isn’t strong or stable enough right now for me to be able to fly her safely.”

“Do not…,” Lan Wangji’s voice cut off as he gripped Wei Wuxian by his upper arms and pulled him to his feet. “Wei Ying does not need to beg. I will help.”

Relief surged through Wei Wuxian’s body so hard at the words that his knees nearly gave way. Lan Wangji must have felt the tremor, and he gently lowered Wei Wuxian back to the mattress he had been resting on, though he did not remove his hands from Wei Wuxina’s shoulders.

His hands are so large. They nearly cover my shoulder blades. The physical strain of kneeling, then standing must have been more than he’d realized, because Wei Wuxian suddenly felt breathless, almost dizzy.

“I will see Jiang Guniang to safety. And then I will return to Wei Ying.” Lan Wangji’s gaze burned down on him with an intensity that Wei Wuxian had only seen on him a few times before, but could not quite understand.

“I can’t stay here,” Wei Wuxian said, trying to keep his voice under control. “It’s too easy to find me if I stay.”

“I will find Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji stated firmly.

“A-Xian, why don’t you use the talisman that you made for me?” Jiang Yanli said, waking up to stand beside Lan Wangji, her hands twisting together with nerves.

Lan Wangji looked at her, and she continued. “When Lotus Pier was attacked, A-Xian made me a message talisman that could find him wherever he was, and would lead him to me. He could… he could find a safe hiding place while we travel, and then send one to you and it would guide you to him.”

Wei Wuxian didn’t know if he should bless or curse his sister. *Of course* part of him wanted Lan Wangji to be with him. But he didn’t want him to be dragged down into Wei Wuxian’s mess any more than he already was.

“Shijie, Lan Zhan can’t just-”

“Yes,” Lan Wangji asserted, fixing his gaze once more on Wei Wuxian. “I will take Jiang Guniang to safety. And Wei Ying will send for me and I will come.”

Wei Wuxian knew he should say no. Lan Wangji could still position his current actions as trying to save Jiang Yanli and return her to safety. If he brings her to the Unclean Realm and then *still* returns to Wei Wuxian he will be placing himself squarely against the orders of his sect.

But he needed Lan Wangji’s help to see his sister to safety. He briefly considered lying, but one look into the intense stare that was locked on his face told him that would not be possible. He could not repay Lan Wangji’s righteousness with lies, even if that righteousness was misplaced.

“Ok, Lan Zhan. I will message you when I’ve found a safe place.”

“When you’ve stopped to rest,” Lan Wangji pressed.

Wei Wuxian sighed. Because *of course* Lan Wangji had seen through the loophole Wei Wuxian had tried to weave (there was never going to be a safe place for him). His body would tire long before he found safety.

“Stubborn,” Wei Wuxian complained, but he felt an odd warmth in his chest nonetheless. No one else would bother to fight so hard for him. “Ok. When I rest.”

Lan Wangji studied him for another moment, then nodded.

There was a brief flurry of Jiang Yanli gathering the medical supplies and explaining the herbs to Wei Wuxian while he set wards that would notify him if someone had found their hideout. It would give him a heads up on how close on his trail his enemies might be.

Jiang Yanli hugged him tight, saying her goodbyes, making Wei Wuxian promise to stay safe and come see her as soon as it was safe. Lan Wangji stood in front of him for several suspended moments, his face unreadable, the air thick with a tension that left Wei Wuxian as confused as he felt breathless.

Then Lan Wangji turned, mounting Bichen in a fluid motion, gently lifting Jiang Yanli with him. And they were gone.

To be continued...

A/N - I am trying to get back into a schedule of updating every other week. Let's see how it goes!!!! We are about 3/4 of the way through the outline I had for this story, so I promise this will not meander forever.

Chapter 30: Comfort on the forest floor

A/N - Hello!! I am a FULL WEEK early! Such madness. I think this is because there aren't as many characters in these scenes to worry about. Large group scenes are so hard because you have to keep track of what is going on with each character. Otherwise it's like, "Oh, what happened to person X? They havent' spoken in 3 pages but they were standing right there when this important thing was happening. Did they die? Get kidnapped? Fall asleep? What are you doing with them?" Which then requires a rewrite of the scene and is so fucking painful. BUT NOW WE ARE DOWN TO 1-2 CHARACTERS in these and it is soooo much easier to write. LOL. Thank you so ZazGeek for beta-ing, even on surprise short notice!!!

Also, welcome to the 'romance' arc of the story. :)

Wei Wuxian drew a somewhat shaky breath as he watched Lan Wangji and Jiang Yanli disappear from sight. There was a tight pressure-pain in his chest, and it wasn't all due to the still-healing hole from the arrow that had punched through him.

It was hard to let Lan Wangji take Jiang Yanli when all Wei Wuxian wanted was to keep her safe himself with his whole being, and to find out if there had been others involved in the attack on her and rip their limbs from their body. He wanted to be there with her to keep her safe, to protect her. But right now, he was too weak to do anything but put her in danger. The resentful energy had dissipated enough from his body so that his own qi could flow and accelerate the healing process, but the journey here, carrying his sister on his sword with his qi restricted, had strained his body and set his healing back significantly. He was not going to be able to be on his feet for long, much less fight off any potential attackers.

He trusted Lan Zhan. He trusted him in a way that he couldn't even fully understand, except that he knew, down to his bones, that Lan Wangji was the most honorable man he'd ever met. He was strong and he was good and he would keep his word and protect Jiang Yanli with his life.

But it wasn't just worry for his sister that had Wei Wuxian struggling to watch them leave, and that confused him even more. He was used to missing his Shijie. That was a wound that had not grown closed, but had at least grown familiar. He didn't know what to make of the fact that watching Lan Wangji leave was almost somehow *worse* . That made no sense at all.

Sure, Lan Wangji was a powerful cultivator, but so was Wei Wuxian. In fact, given his new abilities in cultivating resentful energy, Wei Wuxian was probably the most powerful cultivator there was. The feeling of safety and calm that he had when he was with Lan Wangji made no sense. Wei Wuxian could protect himself just fine.

He had survived the Burial Mounds all on his own.

He didn't need protection. And it wasn't like Lan Wangji was great at making conversation to fill the silence of being alone. The things that Wei Wuxian realized he would be missing didn't even make any sense.

There was no reason why the subtle, masculine scent of sandalwood that clung to Lan Wangji's pristine robes should evoke such a strong feeling from Wei Wuxian. Just like there was no reason why a flash of pure white or the ridiculously prissy posture of a strong back should make his heart pick up a notch. It was… it was…

Wei Wuxian shook himself, picking up the satchel of medicinal herbs from Wen Qing that Jiang Yanli had packed for him. It was probably just because Lan Wangji had fought by his side in the war. They had gone through a terrible experience together, and so Wei Wuxian felt connected to him. That was normal, right? There were lots of stories that talked about the bonds of friendship and brotherhood that were forged between warriors who fought together.

Who knows, maybe he and Lan Wangji would become sworn brothers?

The thought still didn't feel quite right, but the permanence of it filled Wei Wuxian with warmth anyway. The feeling quickly died, however, when he realized that Lan Wangji's sect would never allow something like that between their perfect Second Jade and a clan-less 'demonic' cultivator like Wei Wuxian.

He shoved the disappointment down and focused on the business at hand. His emotions were all over the place most of the time, and - really - he should just get used to it. He needed to get out of there before someone less honorable than Lan Wangji figured out where he was. He hadn't carried much with him when he'd run the first time, so there wasn't much to pack.

He made sure to leave tracks pointing south until he reached a small river. Then he shakily mounted his sword and headed northwest, keeping low to the ground, well below the tree line so no one could see him unless they were already right on top of him. He was careful to leave no trace as he passed; not even a bruised leaf or bent branch. He would skirt the Nie territory, far enough away to be out of the area of the most focused search , and head towards some of the territories further north where there were no sect claims on the land. Until his body was back in fighting form, he'd have to lie low.

Lan Wangji had said that at least some of the sect leaders, his brother included, were taking the search for their attackers seriously. Wei Wuxian would give them until he had finished healing to find them. He recognized that it was probably the politically savvy thing to do, even if he hadn't been injured. But Wei Wuxian had spent his entire life ignoring what was politically savvy if it went against what he believed to be right.

He would let them handle it while he was healing. But if the Lan and the Jin did not find who was behind the attempt on his Shijie's life during that time, then Wei Wuxian would come back and handle it for them.

And there would be nothing politically savvy about it.

Wei Wuxian didn't make it very far on his sword before his hands started to shake from the effort of maintaining control enough of his qi to keep *Suibian* steady. His breath was coming in rapid pants and a thin sheen of sweat covered his face despite the chill in the air.

He slowed his sword, then jumped off, stumbling as he hit the ground with too much forward momentum and not enough strength in his body to maintain it on his own feet.

“Fuck!” he muttered as his shoulder slammed into the trunk of a tree, jarring his injury and knocking the breath out of him.

He had been hoping he could go a lot further, since flying covered ground more quickly than walking, and also left less of a trail. But his strength was gone, and he wanted nothing more than to lay down and rest.

But he couldn’t rest. Not yet. He’d promised Lan Wangji that he would send him a message when he stopped to rest. When he’d made that promise, he’d been planning to simply put off resting as long as possible to give the Second Jade plenty of time to see Jiang Yanli safely to the Unclean Realm and hopefully continue his investigation a bit more into who was behind it.

He had wondered why Lan Zhan had let him off the hook so easily on the promise, but the man had likely been able to assess Wei Wuxian’s physical condition well enough to know that it wouldn’t be long before Wei Wuxian was sending for him.

Wei Wuxian breathed out a half-laugh. “Ah, Lan Zhan. Always so smart.”

Given the short amount of time that had passed, it was unlikely that they had even reached the Nie Sect’s gates, much less discussed anything about what was happening.

Wei Wuxian gritted his teeth. He had done a lot of shitty things in his life, but he could not lie to Lan Wangji and rest without sending the message. He just… he couldn’t.

So that meant that he had to keep walking. Just because he couldn’t fly didn’t mean he had to rest. Walking was definitely not *resting* , especially in the condition he was currently in. The thought had barely crossed his mind when the warning talisman he’d placed in the shack they’d been staying at activated.

Whoever had been looking for him wasn’t far behind. Luckily, Wei Wuxian was already out of sight both of the shack and where he’d left the false trail. Still, it wouldn’t do to let his guard down too soon.

He leaned against the tree for a few more moments to gather his strength and concentrated on isolating the pain in his chest and locking it away. After a few steadying breaths, he levered himself away from the tree and began to walk.

Wei Wuxian was no longer sure exactly how much time had passed. Each step he took gave Lan Wangji more time to get his sister to safety. More time to make sure they weren’t followed. More time to find out if there was danger inside the Nie sect.

He tripped over a tree root and stumbled again. He’d lost count of how many times he had fallen at this point, each one jarring the wound in his chest, bringing him closer and closer to complete exhaustion. His qi has been nearly drained by his efforts to keep his wound from bleeding, and providing energy for his body. He wasn’t sure exactly how long it had been since he’d eaten solid food, but it had definitely been long enough that his body was drawing on his qi to sustain itself.

His vision was going hazy and he knew that if he waited any longer, he would run the risk of collapsing without enough energy to send off the locating talisman he promised to Lan Zhan. If

he failed at everything else, he could not let himself fail Lan Zhan.

There was a dense copse of trees just ahead, providing almost complete cover from anyone searching him from the sky. It was as good a place to rest as any. Wei Wuxian staggered over to the center of it and slumped against the trunk of a large tree. He felt a guilty rush of relief as he sketched out the characters for the talisman and activated it, watching it speed off towards Lan Wangji.

He shouldn't have been glad he was summoning him. Lan Wangji had responsibilities that extended far beyond Wei Wuxian; things that were *actually* important - like his sect, the war negotiations, and finding out who was behind the attack. But Lan Wangji could be more stubborn than a mountain when he put his mind to something, and if he had said that he would come back for Wei Wuxian, then he would. In any case, Wei Wuxian was hurting, exhausted and half delirious. He had done as much as he could to delay sending the message. Lan Wangji could come, check on him, make sure no one had found him and stolen the seal, then go back to the things that were actually important.

Wei Wuxian realized distantly that keeping the seal out of corrupt hands probably actually *was* important, and he felt both a relief and a disappointment in realizing that this was a much better explanation for why Lan Wangji had been so adamant about coming back to him immediately than anything Wei Wuxian had been able to come up with before.

His eye drifted closed before the talisman even disappeared from sight. The ground was cold, the forest was silent, and Wei Wuxian couldn't help but wish in that moment that he wasn't so completely alone.

Wei Wuxian's sleep was restless, his body and mind exhausted, unable to fight off the chill of the evening air. He drifted in and out of awareness, unsure if he was asleep or unconscious at times. He felt his body shiver in the cold, but it was in a detached sort of way, as though his body belonged to someone else.

Then, somehow, the cold was gone. Wei Wuxian was still just below the surface of consciousness, exhaustion weighing him down to keep from fully awakening. Through the haze of sleep, he felt strong hands lifting him up, and a soft warmth wrapping around him. His eyelids felt like lead but he managed to lift them slightly, though the gentle strength of the touch and the trace of sandalwood on the fabric that wrapped around him had already told him who it was.

"Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian murmured, his words sounding oddly unclear to his own ears.

"Wei Ying pushed himself too hard. Rest." Lan Wangji's voice was stern, and Wei Wuxian found an exhausted laugh bubbling out of his own chest at the sound. How many times had Lan Wangji lectured him in the past?

"Ah, Lan Zhan. So mean to this Wei Ying," Wei Wuxian murmured, not even really paying attention to his words. Lan Wangji was there with him. He had come, and Wei Wuxian was no longer cold. Even if he had only come to protect the seal, he was here.

"Then Wei Ying should stop asking me to leave him alone, when he always gets injured when I do." Lan Wangji's voice was strained, the words sounding almost as though they had been

spoken against his will.

Wei Wuxian managed to let his eyes drift open again.The sun was already rising, bathing Lan Wangji's face in a warm glow of the dappled light that was filtered through the canopy of trees overhead.

Lan Zhan is so beautiful .

His golden eyes seemed almost soft as he looked down at Wei Wuxian, but they were also incredibly intense in their focus on him. Wei Wuxian tried to read the expression better, but his eyes were already closing and he felt himself slumping back, unable to sit up. Lan Wangji's strong arms were already around him, keeping him from falling back. Wei Wuxian frowned slightly. He didn't want to go back to sleep.

Want to look at Lan Zhan. So pretty.

The air around him was cold, but Lan Wangji radiated a solid, comforting heat. Wei Wuxian turned his face to press into Lan Wangji's shoulder, just at the base of his throat, breathing in the scent that made him feel safe and relaxed as he slipped back towards unconsciousness.

Smells so good. Lan Zhan is so good.

He was too tired to realize that he'd been speaking his thoughts aloud. With his eyes closed, he didn't see the shock and almost painful hope on Lan Wangji's face, or feel the way the strong arms carefully tightened around him, holding him close for hours while Wei Wuxian slept.

Wei Wuxian woke to the scent of something cooking, and the smoky warmth of a small fire. He vaguely remembered Lan Wangji arriving and scolding him for pushing himself too far, but the rest was just a fuzzy blur. He felt much warmer than could be accounted for by the small campfire, and opened his eyes to see that he was wrapped in one of Lan Wangji's expensive white outer robes. Lan Zhan must have dressed him in it while Wei Wuxian slept, which was pretty embarrassing.

"Wei Ying. How do you feel?" Lan Zhan was seated beside him, looking pristine and elegant despite having slept on the forest floor and making a campfire.

Wei Wuxian was sure he looked as much of a mess as he felt, if not worse. He was probably getting Lan Wangji's robes all dirty, which would explain why Lan Wangji's gaze on him felt even more intense than usual.

"Sorry," Wei Wuxian said, levering himself up on one of his forearms and trying to pull the soft, supple, white fabric from his shoulders.

"Don't," Lan Wangji said sharply, his hand shooting out to grip Wei Wuxian's wrist, stopping him.

Wei Wuxian felt his eyebrows lift in surprise. Lan Wangji did not like unnecessary physical contact.

“Wei Ying needs to stay warm,” Lan Wangji said in explanation, though the vehemence of it still seemed odd to Wei Wuxian.

“You made a fire for that. I’m getting your robe all dirty,” Wei Wuxian said.

Lan Wangji’s grip did not loosen, his eyes flickering briefly over Wei Wuxian’s body, which was still swathed in the white robe. He was probably checking for stains and grime, likely regretting his hasty decision to use his own clothing as a blanket for Wei Wuxian. Lan Wangji was known for being extremely prissy about *anyone* touching his things.

“It does not matter. Rest. Breakfast is almost ready.”

Lan Wangji released him, returning to stirring the small pot of what smelled like congee cooking over the campfire. His posture was rigidly correct, as always. Lan Wangji’s skin must be sensitive, because his ears were pink from the heat of the small fire. The thought made Wei Wuxian chuckle softly to himself.

Wei Wuxian was too tired to focus on anything other than the smooth, precise movements of Lan Wangji’s hands as he prepared their breakfast. It was so soothing. Most people seemed to find Lan Wangji cold and intimidating, but Wei Wuxian found his presence comforting. He wondered how long he would stay.

“How is Shijie? Did you have any trouble getting her to the Unclean Realm?”

“She is safe. Red Blade Master is with her now,” Lan Wangji said, handing Wei Wuxian a steaming bowl of the congee he had cooked.

Wei Wuxian felt himself relax somewhat at those words. If Nie Mingue took her under his protection, no one could touch her. She was safe.

“Thanks, Lan Zhan.”

“There is no need for thank you.”

Wei Wuxian disagreed wholeheartedly, but he knew better than to try to argue with Lan Wangji when he had that look to his face. Wei Wuxian ate the food gratefully, despite its lack of flavor. It was campfire cooking, and even Wei Wuxian with all his love of spice didn’t always have anything to season his food when he was in the wilderness. He could feel some of his light-headedness leaving as he ate.

Lan Wangji did not eat - likely having eaten much earlier - but he watched Wei Wuxian to make sure he finished it all.

“The wards went off not long after I left,” Wei Wuxian said, when he had finished eating.

Lan Wangji was smart enough to know what that would imply.

“Mm,” Lan Wangji acknowledged. “Brother is playing Enquiry to the spirits of those who attacked you and Jiang Guniang. We will know who the others are before long.”

Wei Wuxian was somewhat surprised that Lan Xichen was going this far in the investigation, but he supposed the fact that Jiang Yanli had also been attacked helped. The thought of his sister reminded him that his brother was probably ready to burn the entire Jin (and possibly Lan) sect down to find out who hurt his sister. Jin Zixuan had better be right there with him, or Jiang Cheng would end him.

“Did you see… how is Jiang Cheng?”

“Sect Leader Jiang is looking forward to the knowledge of who is behind the attack on his siblings.”

Wei Wuxian managed not to flinch at the reminder that Jiang Fengmian was dead. It still hurt to hear Jiang Cheng’s new title, even though Wei wuxian knew his brother would likely be a stronger leader than his father had been.

“You mean his sister,” Wei Wuxian automatically corrected.

Lan Wangji gave him a sharp look. “Sect Leader Jiang specified the Jiang Sect would be seeking retribution against anyone who attacked *either* of his siblings. Sect Leader Jin is also promising swift action against any in his sect involved with the attack on his betrothed or her brother.”

Wei Wuxian knew his mouth had fallen open, but he couldn't quite find the strength to close it. Jiang Cheng could have just focused on Shijie, or even the seal. Why make it about Wei Wuxian, when that was so much riskier?

“But.. *why* ? I mean, obviously they should protect Shijie, but Jiang Cheng has barely been the head of the Jiang for five minutes. He can’t go around pissing everyone off. And the Peacock isn’t much better. Lan Zhan, you have to talk some sense into them! Shijie will be fine, but they can’t come after everyone who decides to have a go at me. That will be *endless* . And what about you? Lan Zhan, it’s fine for you to go and bring Jiang Yanli back. But your uncle is going to kill you if you keep going against his rules about interacting with me.”

Lan Wangji ignored him entirely, rinsing out the small pot he had used for cooking breakfast before taking a cup of steaming liquid that smelled of medicinal herbs and pressing it into Wei Wuxian’s hands and taking the empty bowl.

Wei Wuxian felt almost disoriented, and his agitation kept escalating. His chest felt tight and he was becoming short of breathThis wasn’t supposed to happen. Wei Wuxian was supposed to protect Jiang Cheng, not the other way around. Lan Wangji was supposed to continue to be the perfect Lan disciple, reporting Wei Wuxian for disciplining, not throwing away his reputation cooking congee in the dirt for a rogue cultivator.

Wei Wuxian was fucking everything up for everyone around him and he didn’t know what to do about it.

“That… that *idiot* ! He can’t… You shouldn’t… What the fuck is everyone *thinking* ?!”

“Drink,” Lan Wangji said, continuing to ignore all of Wei Wuxian’s words and lifted the cup in Wei Wuxian’s hands, bringing it to his mouth, a soothing hand moving to his back. “Breathe.”

Wei Wuxian glared at him over the rim, but forced his breathing to slow enough to allow him drink the medicine. As soon as he had swallowed it all, Lan Wangji took the cup and set it aside, watching him with concerned eyes.

“Wei Ying should rest,” Lan Wangji said.

Wei Wuxian just blinked at him, feeling confused and upset but also extremely tired. Lan Wangji arched a brow, waiting for Wei Wuxian to respond. When he didn’t, Lan Wangji pressed a hand against Wei Wuxian’s chest, just enough to give the signal that Wei Wuxian was supposed to lay down. Wei Wuxian looked down at the hand that was splayed across his chest, noticing hazily that one of Lan Zhan’s hands spanned almost the entire width of his chest without even stretching.

“Rest,” Lan Zhan repeated, pressing more firmly against Wei Wuxian’s chest until he lay back down.

“Lan Zhan, I -,” Wei Wuxian began, but Lan Wangji cut him off by sending a gentle pulse of qi into his middle dantian. The soothing feel of it distracted Wei Wuxian from what he had been going to say.

Lan Wangji’s qi just felt so… right. So smooth and pure and just… so Lan Zhan. Which made sense, of course, because the energy *was* Lan Zhan’s own qi. But it was just… it felt…

Wei Wuxian let his eyes drift close as Lan Wangji continued to pass him spiritual energy. He was definitely going to argue with Lan Wangji when he woke up. About a lot of things. A thought made him startle, and his eyes shot open.

“You’ll still be here? When I wake up?”

It was probably annoying and overly clingy for him to ask. There were many reasons why Lan Wangji should *not* stay, and almost no reason *to* stay, but Wei Wuxian asked anyway.

“I will be here,” Lan Wangji said simply, continuing to channel his qi steadily into Wei Wuxian.

Wei Wuxian looked at him a moment, but couldn’t hold Lan Wangji’s gaze. He felt… he didn't’ know what he felt. At least ten different things all at once, and none of them made any sense. Figuring out talismans was so much easier than thinking about emotions, which never made any sense and seemed to always spring up out of nowhere without warning. But the fatigue was creeping up on him, Lan Wangji’s qi was soothing him from the inside, and all he could do was nod in acknowledgement as his eyes grew heavy again.

He wondered if this was what Wen Qing had meant when she said that some people’s qi was compatible with others. Wei Wuxian hadn’t had many people pass him spiritual energy, but he could sense the flavor of others when he used to night hunt with other cultivators, and no one's energy was anything like Lan Wangji’s.

Then again, there was a reason that Lan Wangji had the title Hanguang-Jun. Probably everyone felt the same peace when in the presence of Lan Wangji’s spiritual energy. How could they not? Wei Wuxian’s energy was more like a chaotic fire tornado. No one could possibly find *that* soothing.

He pushed down the disappointment that he would never be able to return the favor to Lan Wangji, should the man become injured. Wei Wuxian would pour everything he had into the man to save him if he needed it, but it would never bring him the peace and comfort that Lan Wangji's presence alone was able to bring to Wei Ying.

He fell asleep before he could complete the thought.

To be continued…

A/N - As you can tell, I am very focused on the fact that lwj's language of love is acts of service and caring, and wwx's language of love is self-sacrifice. These... are not compatible, but at the same time make their romance so agonizingly beautiful that it's literally all I can think about. Welcome to the romance arc!!!

Chapter 31: Trust

A/N - Yay!! I am on time for this chapter! Onward with the romance arc. Thanks again to ZazGeek for beta-ing this for me.

“Wei Ying.”

Wei Wuxian woke to Lan Wangji’s voice speaking quietly, urgently. He had been on enough night hunts to recognize what that particular tone meant. His hand was silently reaching for *Suibian* before he’d even opened his eyes fully.

Lan Wangji was crouched next to him, his eyes on the trees to the south of them. Sunlight streamed through the trees at an angle that put the time around late afternoon.

“Someone is coming. We must leave now.” Lan Wangji spoke low, his head bent so the soft, warm breath that formed his words brushed against Wei Wuxian’s ear.

Wei Wuxian did not question how Lan Wangji knew this, but he had no intention of running away if the people who were involved in the attack on his sister were coming. Even if there were cultivators who hadn’t been at the final battle, everyone by now knew exactly who and what Wei Wuxian was. He would not feel guilty offering death to the men who chose to seek it out by attacking his sister and then being foolish enough to pursue him. He grabbed his pouch and levered himself up to a sitting position, drawing a slow breath and checking the condition of his body. He must have slept for at least a day, because the extreme fatigue was gone and he only felt the ache of the wound in his chest.

More importantly, his qi was restored to a level that meant he could fight. He drew *Suibian* and listened intently for signs of their would-be attackers while Lan Wangji quickly finished burying the remains of their fire. There was not enough time to erase the traces that they had been there, but banking the fire would make it a little harder for whoever was searching for them to pinpoint how long ago they’d been there. If Wei Wuxian had planned on running, it would have been an excellent idea.

Of course Lan Zhan would think of that, Wei Wuxian thought, almost fondly, his lips curving up in a slight smile. Lan Wangji was so completely competent in any circumstance. It was almost more impressive than his ridiculous physical strength or immense golden core.

Maybe that was the reason that Wei Wuxian had slept so soundly, free of nightmares and restless anxiety while Lan Wangji was keeping watch over him. Of course, Lan Wangji was also the type of person who would avoid a fight if he could, trusting in the system of sect laws to punish any misdeeds.

Wei Wuxian was not as patient, nor as trusting.

Lan Wangji turned, his brows drawing together fractionally at seeing Wei Wuxian with his sword drawn. Their gazes locked for a moment, and Wei Wuxian tensed. Lan Wangji was an honorable man. An honorable cultivator. While it was perfectly acceptable for a cultivator to

hunt monsters who killed humans, it was *not* acceptable to kill other cultivators, outside of a very strict code of war or duals.

“You go on ahead,” Wei Wuxian said quietly. “I’ll catch up.”

“Wei Ying. Come with me. We can outrun them.”

Wei Wuxian’s lips curved into a cold smirk. “Yeah. I’m not really interested in running away from anyone who was involved in attacking my sister.”

The sharp sound of a foot landing on a branch whispered through the trees. They were close now.

“Lan Zhan. You should leave.” Wei Wuxian knew his voice sounded harsh, but he couldn’t control the anger rising in him at the thought of the cultivators behind the attack on his Shijie.

Lan Wangji looked at him steadily, then drew his sword, turning to face the direction where the sound had come.

“Do not kill unless needed,” Lan Wangji said shortly.

Wei Wuxian rolled his eyes, but didn’t have time to further push Lan Wangji to leave, because the next moment five dark-robed men burst through the trees. This time, they had taken the time to fully change their robes, so there was no tell-tale flash of a sect color beneath the dark robes to give away their identity.

Their eyes widened in shock as they took in Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji, which struck Wei Wuxian as odd since he was fairly sure they had been tracking him. The cultivators had their swords drawn, but somehow still didn’t look prepared for battle.

“You said that it would just be *him* , and that he was too injured to *stand* and he’d be easy to *kill* !” one of the cultivators whisper-shouted to the cultivator who was in the front.

Lan Wangji’s eyes narrowed dangerously. “Dishonorable.”

The men stood, frozen, seemingly too afraid to attack a target that could defend itself, but also realizing that running away was not an option with Hanguang Jun glaring unrelenting fury down upon them.

The moment stretched, taut with uncertainty. Then, suddenly, an arrow was loosed, shooting directly at Wei Wuxian. Before Wei Wuxian could even blink, Lan Wangji had deflected the arrow with Bichen, then pivoted and run the cultivator through who had fired it.

Everyone reacted at once, swords clashing as the remaining cultivators attacked. It was over in seconds, and Wei Wuxian once again found himself with a handful of dead cultivators strewn about his feet. Unlike the last time, however, he was not the one who had dealt the majority of the killing blows.

He cleaned his sword, then re-sheathed it before turning to look at Lan Wangji.

“I thought you said not to kill them,” Wei Wuxian said, surprised to see Lan Wangji still glaring down at the corpses as though dying wasn’t a sufficient punishment.

“They planned to attack you while you were alone and incapacitated.”

Wei Wuxian shrugged. “Well, yeah. I mean, if they want to try to take the seal from me by force, this is pretty much the only chance they’ll get.”

Lan Wangji looked at him flatly.

“What! Look, it’s not bragging if it’s true. They just saw me take out an entire army. Lan Zhan, you seem so shocked!”

Lan Wangji’s jaw clenched. “It is dishonorable.”

Wei Wuxian breathed out a short laugh. There had been so many ‘dishonorable’ things that Lan Wangji had seen. But he didn’t go killing them all for it. The stress of the war could evidently even make someone as pure as Lan Wangji react more harshly. He just hoped that the man wouldn’t regret his actions later, if conscience got the better of him.

“Ah, Lan Zhan. You are too good for the cultivation world. No sect is fully honorable.”

Lan Wangji looked as though he wanted to say something more, but in the end, he pulled out his guqin and began to play. As the sounds of Rest floated through the forest, Wei Wuxian set a marker talisman in one of the trees. The bodies would need to be collected, identified, and properly put to rest.

When Lan Wangji was satisfied that they were not going to leave any resentful energy behind, he turned to Wei Wuxian.

“The attack has strained your wounds. We need a safe place for you to rest.”

Wei Wuxian had no reason to argue, so they finished packing up their camp and headed out.

Wei Wuxian followed the flashes of pure white that he could see through the branches ahead of him (really, how Lan disciples manage to sneak up on *anything* had always been beyond his comprehension). They traveled for several hours, with Lan Wangji occasionally slowing down and looking back over his shoulder, clearly assessing whether or not Wei Wuxian was ok to continue.

Wei Wuxian did his best to appear un-tired in those moments, even if Lan Wangji’s eyes occasionally narrowed as though calling him out on the pretense. It wasn’t that Wei Wuxian was going to fall off his sword or anything so humiliating (he really hoped), but he would have been lying if he said he wasn’t feeling drained, his wound aching more and more as time dragged on. It was a good thing that staying hidden from a potential enemy in the middle of the day required silence, so Lan Wangji didn’t ask any questions about how he was feeling.

He wished he could ask where they were going, though. Lan Wangji seemed to have a specific destination in mind. Based on how long they had been flying and the direction of the sun, Wei Wuxian estimated that they were approaching the northwestern border of the Nie Sect lands. He

supposed it made sense to stay within the Nie borders. Any direct attack on them would be considered an act of aggression against the Nie, and Red Blade Master had already said that Wei Wuxian had his sect's protection.

Wei Wuxian was beginning to struggle with matching the brutal pace that Lan Wangji was setting. He knew that the man would notice the instant Wei Wuxian started to lag behind, and it was a combination of knowing they were setting this pace for a reason as well as his own pride that had him clenching his teeth and pushing forward.

Lan Wangji slowed, looking over his shoulder once more. He gave a slight nod, as though Wei Wuxian had spoken, then turned hard to the right. Wei Wuxian followed, though he wobbled a tiny bit on the hairpin turn. The Second Jade's head turned slightly, as though he had somehow *seen* the tiny sign of weakness from the back of his head. They travelled only a few more minutes before Lan Wangji descended into a narrow gorge and… completely disappeared.

Wei Wuxian paused at the edge of the gorge, looking down the steep embankment, but all he could see was the shallow, frothy river that surged at its base.

He paused slowly looking around. Lan Wangji had not activated a talisman. Wei Wuxian would have seen it. So there must be…

A flash of white from midway down the rocky cliff caught his eye, and he headed directly towards it. Lan Wangji stood in a narrow opening in the rock, looking at him impassively as he stepped back, allowing Wei Wuxian to enter what quickly opened up to be a moderately large cavern.

"Lan Zhan, this is amazing! But there is no fucking way you saw this just by flying over. Even the great Hanguang Jun is not that good."

Lan Wangji's face didn't move, but Wei Wuxian could sense the slightly exasperated amusement radiating from him.

"Hm. Night hunt two years ago," Lan Wangji admitted as he turned and walked deeper into the cave.

Wei Wuxian followed, letting his eyes adjust to the darkness of the cave. The air was cool, but fresh. Too fresh for a dead-end cave.

"Where is the other opening?" he asked.

Lan Wangji did not look surprised at his question. "There are narrow fissures further back. Not enough for a human to enter."

"So it allows air flow, but we only have to guard one entrance, and it's almost impossible to see from the top of the gorge. Nice find, Lan Zhan!"

Lan Wangji did not reply. He reached into his pouch and pulled out the white cloak that Wei Wuxian had slept in the night before and spread it on the ground.

"Rest. I will prepare food."

“Lan Zhan, I’m fine! Really, I -,” Wei Wuxian cut himself off at the golden-eyed glare shot his way.

In truth, he really did want to at least sit. He didn’t need to *sleep* , though. He gave an exaggerated huff to express how he felt about Lan Wangji’s mother-henning him - which Lan Wangji, of course, ignored - and sat down on the soft cloak.

“Fine. I’ll just sit here and let you do all the work. You know your fancy robe is going to be ruined, right?”

“Mm. The robe is of no matter.”

Voices of the past echoed in Wei Wuxian’s head: *you’re a burden, nothing but trouble, never wanted you here, all you do is take...*

Wei Wuxian ignored the voices in his head, used to their familiar words. He was aware that most people would agree with them. Lan Wangji was nice to him when he shouldn’t be, but Wei Wuxian was too tired to argue the point.

He leaned back on his elbows and watched Lan Wangji make a small fire with some dried wood that had been set up in a make-shift fire pit. He wondered if Lan Wangji had provisioned the cave while he was waiting for Wei Wuxian’s summons, or if this was left from the prior occupant.

“So, what did you hunt here, anyways?” Wei Wuxian asked.

“Tiger Yaogui,” Lan Wangji replied.

Wei Wuxian waited, but there were no other details forthcoming, which was really a shame, because Tiger Yaogui were both dangerous and rare.

“Ah, Lan Zhan! You need to tell your exploits better. The handsome Second Jade of Lan, battling a ferocious Tiger Yaogui in the moonlight over a secret river gorge. All the pretty maidens would swoon!”

Lan Wangji shot him a cold, angry glare that made Wei Wuxian laugh at how familiar the sight was.

“Lan Zhan is so proper. Even the hint of romance outside of a formal betrothal has you so angry! There’s nothing wrong with flirting with a pretty girl, you know. Especially someone who is expected to carry on the family name, like you and your brother are supposed to. Weren’t you supposed to be looking for a cultivation partner before the war started?”

“Promiscuity is forbidden. Excessive self-praise is forbidden.” Lan Wangji bit out. His tone was almost back to the way it had been when they’d first met: prickly and angry.

Wei Wuxian chuckled again, a wave of fondness washing over him. Lan Wangji was so pure, even the hint of impropriety had him glaring.

“Ok, ok. I won’t tease. Lan Zhan is too good,” Wei Wuxian said in his most conciliatory tone.

Lan Wangji shot him another glare, clearly not appeased, which only made Wei Wuxian's grin widen.

He would never understand the people who said that Lan Wangji was boring. Wei Wuxian could happily spend the rest of his life finding ways to get little reactions out of the man. Whether it was throwing around increasingly wild cultivation ideas until Lan Wangji called him out on his bullshit, or provoking Lan Wangji's repressed modesty by pointing out all the girls that swooned when the Second Jade walked by. Sure, Lan Wangji didn't speak much, but he could compress an entire essay worth of words in one scathing *look.*

He was *the best* , and other people who didn't see that were clearly just idiots.

They sat in companionable silence as Lan Wangji moved on from making the fire to pulling out a small flask of water which he began heating, presumably to make the medicinal tea that Wei Wuxian was supposed to take.

Lan Wangji had always been a man of few words, but there were some questions that Wei Wuxian had been expecting him to ask ever since the rumors of the existence of a powerful artifact had surfaced. Rumors that were, in fact, true, and Lan Wangji was aware of that fact.

It was most likely the entire reason his sect was allowing him to be with Wei Wuxian in the first place. Usually, Lan Wangji had no trouble being brutally direct in his questions, but perhaps he was waiting until Wei Wuxian was recovered.

Wei Wuxian decided there was no point in putting the conversation off.

"Aren't you going to ask about it?" Wei Wuxian asked, deciding it was time to stop dancing around it.

Lan Wangji did not look up from where he was measuring the herbs Wen Qing had been using into a cup.

"Wei Ying will tell me if he wishes to."

"Agh, Lan Zhan!" Wei Wuxian flopped onto his back in exasperation. "The only possible reason your uncle would allow you to keep this close a watch on me would be if he believed the rumors about the powerful artifact that everyone thinks I'm carrying. Aren't you even going to *ask* ?"

Lan Wangji shook out his sleeves gracefully before pouring the boiling water over the dried herbs, his movements as precise and elegant as any formal tea ceremony could only hope to be. Wei Wuxian was unable to do anything other than watch him, helplessly soaking in every perfect detail of the man and his actions.

"Drink," Lan Wangji said, when he had let it steep the correct amount of time.

Wei Wuxian sat up and accepted the tea, sipping it slowly as his mind raced. It was possible that Lan Wangji didn't *want* to know about the seal, because then he would have to do something about it. But Wei Wuxian was equally sure that Lan Wangji had already drawn his own (correct) conclusions about the nature of the seal, and he was not a man to lie even by omission. If his sect pressed Lan Wangji, he would answer honestly.

So there was really nothing to lose by Wei Wuxian talking to him about it. And, if he were honest with himself, it would be a bit of a relief to have someone as knowledgeable as Lan Wangji study the seal.

Decision made, Wei Wuxian finished his tea, then pulled out the qiankun pouch that held the seal, and tossed it to Lan Wangji.

Lan Wangji caught it without taking his eyes from Wei Wuxian. The golden gaze was steady, and Wei Wuxian found it suddenly hard to breathe. He wasn't exactly sure what the twisting feeling inside him was. Of course, he was trusting Lan Wangji on a level that life had taught him not to. That was probably it.

"You can open it," Wei Wuxian managed, his hand gesturing a slight flick towards the pouch.

Lan Wangji held his gaze for a suspended moment, then turned his attention towards the pouch. He opened it carefully, which… yeah. That made sense.

He drew in a sharp breath as the wards Wei Wuxian had placed around the bag to contain the resentful energy were parted by the bag being opened. A strong flare of resentful energy flooded the cave. Lan Wangji did not reach his hand inside to touch the metal directly.

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji's eyes snapped back up to him, filled with concern.

Wei Wuxain felt his shoulders tense. GusuLan's stance on demonic cultivation was extremely clear, and there was no disguising the nature of the seal.

But instead of the recriminations that he had expected, Lan Wangji asked him something else entirely.

"Where did this come from?"

Wei Wuxian told him. About finding the sword inside the Slaughter Tortoise, how it potentially saved his life when he was thrown in the Burial Mounds, and how he could use it to store resentful energy from his own body, or from his surroundings.

How he had used it during the war to allow him to control his army.

Throughout it all, Lan Wangji did not interrupt, did not throw the pouch down in disgust, did not look away from Wei Wuxian.

When Wei Wuxian had finished speaking, Lan Wangji carefully reached in and allowed his fingers to hover above the seal. He drew his hand back sharply, as though burned, his fingers clenched into a fist.

"You held this?" Lan Wangji asked, drawing the pouch closed to seal off the energy.

Wei Wuxian looked at where Lan Wangji's hand was still clenched in apparent pain, though nothing showed on the man's face.

"Yes? It… it didn't do that to me."

“Hm,” Lan Wangji replied, looking at the bag thoroughly before flexing his fingers, testing their mobility. “Perhaps this will not be as easy for others to wield as they are assuming. Even if they had the mental fortitude to do so.”

“Lan Zhan! Are you complimenting me on my mental prowess? How shocking,” Wei Wuxian smirked, but Lan Wangji’s observations had his mind racing.

Before the Burial Mounds, Wei Wuxian had been able to grip the sword he’d pulled from inside the Slaughter Tortoise. He’d assumed that anyone else could have as well, if they had found it before he had. But maybe that wasn’t true.

Or maybe the seal only allowed Wei Wuxian to wield it because of what had happened in the Burial Mounds. He supposed he would never be able to test it to find out. What was done was done. The Burial Mounds had re-shaped both of them into something different than what they’d been when they’d entered it.

“Hm, I wonder if we could just tell everyone that no one can wield this but me, and then they’d stop trying to steal it.”

Lan Wangji cast him a skeptical look, and Wei Wuxian laughed.

“Yeah, you’re right, Lan Zhan. They wouldn't believe me. And if they did, then they’d just up their efforts to kill me or control me.”

Lan Wangji gave him a stern look.

“Then we will keep Wei Ying safe."

Wei Wuxian laughed at the absolute confidence with which Lan Wangji spoke. As though - just by saying the words - he was making it so.

"We will rest here until you are recovered enough to travel to the Unclean Realm. Brother will have completed Inquiry soon.”

Wei Wuxian’s smile turned cold. “Then we should not delay.”

“Wei Ying must rest. We will go tomorrow.”

Wei Wuxian opened his mouth to argue, but Lan Wangji cut him off.

“Brother will still be tying up matters with the Elders. Leaving now will not get you answers sooner.”

Wei Wuxian sighed. He wanted to find out who was behind the attack that had put his sister in danger. He also wanted to see how the Wen siblings and A-Yuan were doing, given their precarious situation. He was feeling the effects of the medicine, though, and knew he was too drowsy to make the trip right then. And - to Lan Wangji's point - he wouldn't be allowed to speak to Lan Xichen for a while anyway. But just because *he* couldn't, didn't mean Lan Wangji couldn't.

”You could go and meet your brother. They would let you into the discussion,” Wei Wuxian suggested.

Lan Wangji gave him a scathing look, as though Wei Wuxian had spat on his precious headband.

Wei Wuxian raised his hands in defense. "I'd rest! I promise. I'll just sleep while you're gone."

Lan Wangji's glare didn't soften in the slightest.

“I am not leaving you alone again,” Lan Wangji said tersely.

“Fine, fine! I guess it’s only another day,” Wei Wuxian grumbled. “I don’t know why you’re so averse to it, Lan Zhan. You must want to know who got your sect involved in an attack on Shijie. Even if your elders hate me, Shijie is going to be the Young Madam Jin soon.”

Lan Wangji did not deign to reply. Wei Wuxian rolled his eyes, but the medicinal tea was in full effect, making his eyelids droop. He tried glaring at Lan Wangji, but his face must have done something else because Lan Wangji’s angry expression softened into something almost… fond. Before Wei Wuxian could make his face scowl appropriately for the fearsome Yiling Laozu, he’d fallen asleep.

Lan Wangji remained still, back perfectly straight, as he watched Wei Wuxian sleep and guarded the entrance to the cave.

To be continued…

A/N: Also, I got this fic out on time even though we were hit with a hurricane today! Or, to be more honest, we were SUPPOSED to be hit with a hurricane but it veered east of me and all I got was steady rain and a nice breeze. BUT STILL!! LOL. Next up we see what Wen Qing will have to say about all of this, and what the results of Inquiry were.

Chapter 32: A family dinner

A/N - Ok, so I got the chapter out on time, but I am late replying to comments. I will hopefully catch up this weekend!!! Thank you again to ZazGeek for beta'ing this chapter.

Wei Wuxian woke to find Lan Wangji meditating between him and the cave entrance. The fire had gone out, but a soft light filtered in from the entrance of the cave, setting Lan Wangji in silhouette. He was sitting with perfect posture, his body still and unmoving. It was no wonder they called him one of the perfect Jades. Wei Wuxian wished he could carve the man's likeness into a flawless piece of jade, so that everyone would be able to see his perfection the way he could in that moment.

But he would never be able to afford a piece of jade worthy of being shaped into such a form, and he had only mediocre skills at carving. His talent had always been with the brush. Wei Wuxian supposed he would have to settle on sketching him, when he finally had time to breathe. He committed the scene to memory, his artist's eye recording the elegant bones beneath the smooth skin of Lan Wangji's hands, and the way the layers of white silk caught the faint light and flowed over broad, contoured shoulders.

Wei Ying didn't even feel bad about how shabby and unrefined he knew he, himself, looked in comparison. It wasn't about that. It was just… *natural* to appreciate Lan Wangji's ethereal beauty. Like the way people stood in awe of a cascading waterfall, or a majestic sunrise.

The same artist's attention to detail that observed Lan Wangji's form also noticed the pale shadows beneath eyes, and the slight lines of fatigue in his face. Wei Wuxian frowned. When was the last time that Lan Wangji had rested? After the war, there would have been organizing the encampment, then meetings, and when Lan Wangji was not in meetings he seemed to have been playing for Wei Wuxian. Lan Wangji had gone right back into a meeting when Wei Wuxian had been attacked, and Lan Wangji had been searching for him ever since.

Had the man slept at all?

"Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian called out softly.

Even though the purpose of calling out had been to get his attention, Wei Wuxian still felt slightly caught off guard when the intense, golden eyes opened and immediately locked onto him.

"Wei Ying. Are you alright?"

Wei Wuxian huffed out a breath of a laugh.

"Aiya, Lan Zhan. I'm the one who should be asking you that. I've just been laying around sleeping while you fed me and kept watch. When was the last time you slept?"

"Wei Ying is injured," Lan Wangji replied, which was not an answer at all but gave Wei Wuxian all the information he needed.

“Sleep. I’m good to take watch.”

Lan Wangji narrowed his eyes, but before he could object Wei Wuxian continued.

“Lan Zhan. If I had known that letting you find me would mean that you stopped looking after yourself, I wouldn’t have sent the message to you.”

“I would have found Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji said, a hint of stubbornness forming in the angle of his jaw.

Wei Wuxian smirked. “Lan Zhan. I was able to walk through a heavily guarded Wen encampment and no one saw me. I’m healed enough that - if I wanted to not be found - I wouldn’t be. I’m also healed enough to keep watch while Lan Zhan rests. You can either sleep here while I keep watch, or I can disappear and you can see how easy it really is or isn’t to find me when I don’t want to be found.”

Wei Wuxian wasn’t really sure how well his threat would work. His back-up plan was to immediately make the trip to the Unclean Realm and hope that no one intercepted them along the way, and then have Mingjue sort Lan Wangji out if he was still refusing sleep. Wei Wuxian had noticed how close Red Blade Master was with Lan Xichen, which probably meant his word carried weight with Lan Wangji. Wei Wuxian knew how brothers worked, even though the thought made his chest ache.

Wei Wuxian sighed. “I trusted you to watch over me, Lan Zhan. Do you not trust me the same?”

Lan Wangji looked intently at Wei Wuxian, then slowly nodded. Wei Wuxian was pretty sure his face didn’t manage to hide the pleased surprise he felt as Lan Wangji answered.

“I trust Wei Ying.”

Wei Wuxian felt as though his veins had been filled with tiny sparks of lightning at the words, and he didn’t know how to process how much those words affected him. He shoved the weird feeling down, and focused on unwrapping himself from Lan Wangji’s cloak, carefully standing and shaking it out before laying it back down on the ground.

“Here. No sense in getting anything else of yours dirty. I’ll get the fire going and sit by it for warmth. You sleep. We’ll head to the Unclean Realm when you’ve rested."

Lan Wangji looked at his cloak on the ground, then rekindled the banked fire before he moved to lay down on it. He turned to Wei Wuxian, a slight frown marring his smooth brow in the flickering firelight.

“You do not need to hide from me,” Lan Wanji said, his expression very serious.

That was a fucking loaded statement if Wei Wuxian had ever heard one, and he decided to ignore it.

“Sleep. We’ll leave when you’re rested.”

Lan Wangji was not happy with the lack of response, but he evidently decided this was not the time to push. Wei Wuxian hoped there was never going to be a time to talk about that again, but

the look on Lan Wangji's face told him they would be discussing it again later. Wei Wuxian already felt exposed enough when it came to Lan Wangji, and - as stupid as Wei Wuxian was - even *he* wasn't stupid enough to go and make it even worse by promising something ridiculous like always letting Lan Wangji know where he was.

They were walking separate paths, with Lan Wangji - the heir to one of the largest sects, one known for its rigid adherence to the rules of cultivation they had created - and Wei Wuxian, a rogue cultivator who had never known a rule he couldn't find a way to break at least twice.

The war was over, and as soon as the situation regarding the assassins was put to rest, Lan Wangji was going to have to return to his own path, and leave Wei Wuxian to his. It didn't matter if Wei Wuxian hated the thought of it. Or even if Lan Wangji hated the thought of it.

It was what it was.

Wei Wuxian reminded himself of this fact multiple times as he watched Lan Wangji sleep, counting the slow, steady breaths of the man as minutes passed.

It really wasn't fair that someone so powerful could also be so beautiful. It was people like Lan Wangji that made some people confuse cultivators with gods, and no one should be fooled into making that mistake.

Wei Wuxian had stopped believing in most things long ago. But somehow… he wanted so badly to believe in Lan Wangji.

They arrived in the Unclean Realm less than a day later, with no surprises along the way. Either Lan Wangji's hiding spot was too good for anyone to get wind of, or the investigation into who was behind the attacks was far enough along that no one else was wanting to jump on that wagon.

Despite having sent no word in advance of their arrival, Nie Huaisang was waiting for them at the gates.

"Wei-xiong!" Nie Huaisang called, walking towards them. "Hanguang Jun," he continued his greeting, much more respectfully and slightly wary, as he addressed Lan Wangji.

Wei Wuxian remembered how terrified that Nie Huaisang (and most of the other guest disciples) had been of Lan Wangji during the guest lectures when they were younger. At least he was willing to speak to the man now, rather than hiding behind Wei Wuxian.

Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji returned Nie Huaisang's greeting, then followed him into the Unclean Realm. There was a much larger contingent of guards at the gate, and more stationed inside.

"Nie-xiong. Are you expecting trouble?" Wei Wuxian asked, wondering why his friend had chosen to personally meet them at the gates, or if the man had been waiting for someone else.

Nie Huaisang didn't pause in his walking, but looked over his shoulder at Wei Wuxian.

“I’m expecting you, and you *are* trouble.”

Wei Wuxian laughed, but he knew that Nei Huaisang was also telling the truth.

“So, because of that, we received a welcome of honor from the Nie Sect Heir?” Wei Wuxian asked, trying to suss out what Nie Huaisang was doing.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Wei-xiong. Why wouldn’t I be excited to greet my friend?”

It wasn’t really an answer. If they feared an attack, it wouldn't be Nie Huaisang who guarded the gates. And as much as they’d had fun at Cloud Recesses together, that was long ago and they hadn’t kept in close enough touch after that for Nie Huaisang to be anxiously waiting at the gate for him. But Wei Wuxian decided he was too tired to think more about it.

“Is Lan XIchen here yet? Do they know who was behind the attack?” Wei Wuxian asked.

“We know,” Nie Huaisang replied grimly. “Zewu-Jun arrived a few hours ago. We will meet them in Brother’s conference room.”

Wei Wuxian looked at Lan Wangji. The man’s expression was as neutral as it always was, but his hand had slid down to rest on *Bichen’s* hilt.

“And Shijie?”

“She’s safe. She’s with Da-ge discussing the situation with your brother. If all goes well, she will be returning home soon. Jiang Wanyin is here now. He and Da-ge have been… *debating* where the safest place for Jiang Guniang would be.”

Ah , Wei Wuxian thought. *That explains it.*

Nie Huaisang would have probably offered to clean the kitchen floors with his precious fans if it meant getting out of the room when Jiang Cheng and Nie Mingjue were arguing about something. Making an excuse to come and wait for Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji would definitely have been preferable.

They arrived at a room deep within the keep, the large, heavy doors warded to allow no sound to pass through. Nie Huaisang pressed his hand against the doors, and they opened, allowing them entry. Inside, Wei Wuxian could see his brother glaring angrily at Nie Mingjue, who stood with his arms crossed, looking down from his considerable height advantage at the young, angry Jiang Sect leader.

Zewu-Jun and Jiang Yanli stood off to one side, looking more fondly amused than actually alarmed by the conflict. But the sight of his sister, safe and unharmed, was what Wei Wuxian was most focused on.

“Shijie!” He called out as they walked in.

Her face lit with happiness and relief as she hurried over to him.

“A-Xian! How are you? You look so pale!”

Wei Wuxian was vaguely aware of Lan Wangji greeting the others in the room, but was distracted by his sister gripping his hands and looking him over, searching for injuries.

“We should call Wen Qing, and have her examine you. Have you been drinking your tea? How is your wound?”

“A-Jie. Don’t fuss. Wei Wuxian is like a cockroach. He’s too hard to kill to die from some pathetic attack like that.” Jiang Cheng stalked over, looking no less angry than he did when he was glaring at Nie Mingjue. “What. You can’t even greet people properly now?”

Wei Wuxian grinned, gently removing his hands from his sister’s grasp to join them together in front of him, giving a perfect, formal bow. Nie Huaisang somehow managed to move as far away as possible from where the two stood, his fan fluttering in front of his face as though to ward off the tension that was still flooding the room.

“Sect Leader Jiang. This humble rogue cultivator greets you.”

“Ugh. Fuck off. Showing that you actually know some manners only makes it worse that you never choose to use them,” Jiang Cheng scoffed, grabbing Wei Wuxian roughly by his shoulders. It jostled the wound in his chest, and he suppressed a wince. Jiang Cheng must have noticed it, though, because his grip loosened slightly. “Look at all the trouble you caused that we have to clean up after. Shijie’s been stuck here away from home because of you. You’re not even part of our sect anymore and she still almost got killed over you!”

“A-Cheng,” Jiang Yanli scolded softly.

His words would have hurt more if Jiang Cheng’s gaze hadn’t been taking the exact same path his sister’s had, methodically checking Wei Wuxian for injury. It was the typical bluster that Jiang Cheng always spouted when he was worried.

Unfortunately, most of the other people in the room did not seem to notice this. Lan Wangji materialized at Wei Wuxian’s side, then stepped slightly forward, his shoulder brushing hard against Jiang Cheng’s forearm, where he was still gripping Wei Wuxian’s shoulders.

The message was not subtle.

Jiang Cheng’s jaw clenched, but he released Wei Wuxian and stepped back, glaring at Lan Wangji.

“What? I’m not allowed to touch my brother now?” Jiang Cheng snapped out.

Wei Wuxian felt a strange rush of… something every time Jiang Cheng referred to him as his brother. That was not something the man did very often, even in the past, and had become even less common as they aged.

Given his expulsion from the Jiang sect, it actually wasn’t even technically true any longer, officially.

“Wei Ying is recovering from his injuries in winning the war, as well as the assassination attempt.”

Lan Wangji did not come out and say that Jiang Cheng’s war contribution had been less, nor did he imply that Jiang Cheng had not been able to protect Wei Wuxian from the assassins, yet somehow the message was conveyed nonetheless.

Jiang Cheng bristled further, but Jiang Yanli stepped in, laying an arm on her youngest brother’s shoulder.

“A-Cheng. A-Xian and Hanguang Jun have not yet heard what Zewu Jun has learned from his investigation. Perhaps we should focus on that right now.”

Jiang Cheng glared at Lan Wangji for a moment more, then relented. “Fine. Let’s get on with it, then.”

Lan Wangji turned to look at the two sect leaders who had walked over to them.

“Brother.”

Lan Xichen understood the word for the question that it was.

“Wangji. Let’s sit down and discuss the situation,” Lan Xichen gestured to the low table that was set up in the center of the room.

They all gathered around it, and Nie Mingjue gestured the servants away who had been waiting to see if food would be needed.

As soon as the doors closed, Nie Mingjue looked first at Jiang Cheng, then Lan Wangji.

“Before Xichen tells you what he’s learned, you need to remember that we have all just lived through one war. We don’t need to immediately start another.”

Jiang Cheng scoffed, clearly not being told this message for the first time. Wei Wuxian wondered why Nie Mingjue was directing his comments to Jiang Cheng and Lan Wangji, and not to him. Of the three, Wei Wuxian was probably considered the most hot-headed. Well, maybe it would be a tie between him and Jiang Cheng, but Lan Wangji was known for his almost inhuman, icy control.

Before he could ask, Lan Xichen was speaking.

“There is no proof that would be sufficient grounds to allow for punishment from anyone outside of the person’s own sect. Wangji, you must understand this.”

Wei Wuxian looked at Lan Wangji, and saw the realization dawn on his expression as to who must have been behind it to warrant this type of warning to this particular group.

“Jin Guangshan?” Wei Wuxian asked.

Jiang Cheng let out a frustrated growl. “Yes. Fucking Jin Guangshan, who decided that his chance of regaining his position as both head of the Jin sect as well as gaining influence outside

of his own sect would be *so much better* if *somehow* he just magically wound up in possession of whatever it was that you had that had made you so fucking invincible!"

Jiang Cheng was basically shouting by the end of it, and it wasn't clear how much anger was at Jin Guangshan and how much was directed at Wei Wuxian, but there was plenty of anger bubbling inside the purple robed cultivator to go around.

"No direct order?" Lan Wangji asked, grasping the main point.

Lan Xichan sighed. "No. Every spirit we spoke with believed that they had acted on their own, coming up with the idea to help their former Sect Leader."

"Evidently your soon-to-be brother-in-law isn't very popular with Jin Guangshan's closest disciples. They thought it would be easy to take a weapon from someone who was clearly injured," Nie Mingjue's derisive tone indicated his opinion on anyone who had to resort to attacking someone who was wounded in order to win.

There was a silence in the room as all eyes shifted to Wei Wuxian. He realized that they were all waiting for him to confirm or deny the existence of such a weapon.

He sprawled back in his chair, the dark murmurings in his mind warning him not to trust, not to tip his hand too soon. The voices in his head didn't trust anyone.

His gaze fell on Jiang Yanli. She gave him a small, encouraging smile. He felt the voices in his head fade slightly, become a little easier to ignore. A solid warmth wrapped around his forearm, and Wei Wuxian looked down to see Lan Wangji's large hand resting there.

"Wei Ying does not need to disclose anything he does not want to," Lan Wangji said.

Jiang Cheng huffed, but a sharp look from his sister prevented him from speaking further.

Wei Wuxian considered his options. The only benefit from keeping the seal a secret had been to prevent people trying to steal it. That ship had already sailed, so - really - he had nothing to lose. He'd already told Lan Wangji.

He gave a short nod.

"There was a sword in the Tortoise of Slaughter. I pulled it out when Lan Zhan and I were fighting it. It was filled with Yin energy." Wei Wuxian waited, but no one spoke. No one demanded to see it. He found himself continuing, even though he didn't really want to think much about the next part.

"When I fell into the Burial Mounds, the energy there… responded to it. It reached out to me as I fell. I think that - without the sword - I would have died from the fall."

Lan Wangji's grip on his arm tightened convulsively, and Wei Wuxian wondered if he would have bruises from the man's fingers, but he continued.

"The sword had some sort of seal in the pommel of the hilt. It absorbed the energy from the Burial Mounds. I was able to use it in the war to help me control the fierce corpses. It doesn't control them for me. It's just like… a source of energy."

Lan Xichen frowned thoughtfully. “So, you still need to concentrate on controlling each individual corpse on your own?”

Wei Wuxian shrugged, and nodded. “Yeah. Pretty much. It’s sort of exhausting.”

Lan Xichen looked over at Nie Mingjue, whose expression looked almost disbelieving.

“There were a thousand fierce corpses that marched in your army. You’re saying you had to concentrate on *each individual body* ?” Nie Migjue asked.

Wei Wuxian wasn’t sure why they were so surprised. “Yeah. I mean, how else is it supposed to work? It’s not like they’re sentient on their own. I didn’t want them killing our own cultivators.”

“Unbelievable,” Jiang Cheng muttered, but he looked almost… proud?

“Ah,” Lan Xichen said, looking over at Lan Wangji with an unreadable expression. “I see. So, then, it is unlikely anyone else would be able to replicate such an army, even if they were able to take it from you.”

Lan Wangji gave a slight nod. “I was unable to touch the seal without it damaging me.”

“You touched it?” Lan Xichen’s words were sharp.

Lan Wangji looked back at him calmly. “Wei Ying showed it to me. He asked for help studying it.”

Lan Xichen did not look appeased, but Nie Mingue looked thoughtful.

“We could spread the rumor that the artifact only responds to Wei Wuxian,” Nie Mingjue said, after a moment.

“Yeah, and paint an even bigger fucking target on his back? No. Absolutely not,” Jiang Cheng retorted.

“It’s not a bad idea,” Wei Wuxian countered. “Jin Guangshan might stop sending people to die over it if he can’t even use it.”

“Let him send them!” Jiang Cheng yelled. “It just makes it that much easier for Jin Zixuan to clean house. Think of it as your pre-wedding present to A-Jie.”

“Sect Leader Jiang,” Lan Xichen said. “We are trying to avoid a war, remember?”

“Jin Guangshan is no longer the sect leader. He has no authority to start a war,” Jiang Cheng countered. “Besides, it’s his own fucking fault that he keeps getting his cultivators killed by sending them after my idiot brother.”

“Just because he doesn’t have official authority doesn’t mean he can’t start a conflict,” Nie Huaisang said quietly. “Even when Wei-xiong was only defending himself and Jiang Yanli, people still talked about him causing problems. The more Jin he kills, the worse it will get. And Jin Guangshan has bought a lot of people for a lot less in the past. He might be currently unseated, but he still has power. If Jin Zixuan ever wants to be seen as the Jin Sect Leader, he needs to be the one to handle this.”

Everyone was quiet for a moment, considering the options.

“The best deterrent to anyone trying to steal the seal is if Wei Wuxian is seen to be fully recovered. No one would be stupid enough to go against him at full strength,” Nie Mingjue stated eventually.

Wei Wuxian blinked, somewhat shocked to hear such words from Red Blade Master.

“Do not underestimate how foolish greed can make people,” Lan Wangji said, his tone flat, but there was such a wealth of bitchy judgement in it, somehow, that Wei Wuxian was sure violated at least 5 Lan Sect rules. He grinned brightly at Lan Wangji, and Jiang Cheng was fighting to hide a smirk of his own at the uncharacteristically biting words from the illustrious Second Jade.

“We should have Wen Daifu see how A-Xian is recovering. Getting him well should be our first priority. He could stay here, behind the walls of Qinghe Nie until then,” Jiang Yanli suggested.

Jiang Cheng might not like it, but only the Nie and Jin sects had not had their walls breached by the enemy. And of the two, it was obvious which one was safer with Jin Guangshan gunning for him.

Nie Huaisang nodded. “People saw him fly here on his own sword. He survived the attack when he was at his most vulnerable, and is clearly at least partially recovered now. We can arrange to have rumors amplify this.”

“No one heals from an arrow to the chest that fast,” Jiang Cheng snapped.

“People believe what they want. They don’t know the nature of the weapon he has, nor the power he wields,” Lan Xichen said. “If they believe he is healed, it will only further his reputation, making it less likely of a direct attack.”

It also would make him more of a target, but no one had a better plan. Jiang Cheng was clearly unhappy and Wei Wuxian wasn’t able to read Lan Wangji’s expression, which seemed even more shuttered than usual. He was somewhat surprised when Lan Wangji spoke.

“We have discussed the Jin disciples. What of the Lan disciple?”

Lan Xichen looked directly at his brother. “The disciple was told to aid the effort by Su She. He disappeared from the encampment shortly after the failed attack on Wei Wuxian was discovered. We have sent Lan cultivators looking for him.”

The name did not ring a bell for Wei Wuxian, but - judging from the absolute scathing fury radiating from Lan Wangji - the man definitely knew him. Wei Wuxian half expected Lan Wangji to get up and leave right that moment to go and find him.

His brother evidently had the same concern.

“Wangji. You must let the elders handle this. The disciples will find him, and they will bring him back to Cloud Recesses for punishment.”

Lan Wangji looked steadily at his brother. “And what punishment will they deliver for attempting to kill a someone they consider a demonic cultivator?”

Lan Xichen did not flinch. “You must trust them, Wangji. They know a wrong was committed. Su She had no authority to do what he did. He had been banished for his earlier actions. But by instigating our disciples to act, he put the Lan sect in possible direct conflict with both the Nie and Jiang sects. They will not treat this lightly.”

Wei Wuxian laughed, the muttering of the voices in his head bubbling up to the surface again. “Ah, of course. They couldn’t care less if someone killed *me* , but the political implications are what they’re worried about.”

Jiang Cheng’s sneer clearly indicated he agreed with Wei Wuxian. Lan Wangji’s burning gaze had not shifted, and Wei Wuxian half expected Lan Xichen to burst into flames at any moment, given the intensity of it.

“Brother. Do you give me your word that the punishment will be appropriate?”

Lan Xichen was the first to break eye contact.

“Wangji. I do not speak for the elders. I have told them my position on this. You must have faith that they will come to the right conclusion.”

“And if they do not?” Lan Wangji asked quietly. “Killing is forbidden. Be just. Do not make assumptions. Do not hold grudges. Do not judge others harshly without understanding.”

Lan Xichen held up a hand, stopping the recitation. The room was still as the two brothers looked at each other, one full of righteous anger, the other full of helplessness.

There was a scuffle at the door, and a small figure catapulted into the room, breaking the moment.

“Xian-gege!” A-Yuan said, racing past the sheepish-faced guards to launch himself into Wei Wuxian’s lap. “I heard them talking that you were here! They said I had to wait but I waited and waited and the door was still closed. I made the guards chase me around, and then I snuck back and opened the door before they catched me!”

Wen Yuan’s face was delighted as he told his tale, but Nie Mingjue’s was decidedly less so as he glared at the guards who had been outmaneuvered by a small child. They were blushing and shifting from foot to foot.

Wei Wuxian laughed. “Ah, A-Yuan. Using your cuteness as a weapon to get past everyone’s defenses! What are we going to do about you?”

“Cakes?” The boy asked brightly, earning a soft laugh from Jiang Yanli.

“Cakes sound good,” she said. “And maybe something more substantial for A-Xian and Hanguang Jun. Have you been eating?”

The servants returned to the room, quickly setting up for a light meal as the conversation shifted to more casual things. Wen Qing and Wen Ning joined them, both expressing their relief to see him well. At least, Wen Ning expressed relief, but Wen Qing simply hummed, casting a sharp, assessing eye over him, making it clear she was taking note of every slight flinch as he moved, every bit of weight he’d lost, and every minuscule sign of fatigue.

Wei Wuxian was grateful he was being allowed to eat before being poked and prodded by Wen Qing. He would likely be in for a long evening involving many needles. But it didn't matter, in that moment. The people he cared most about were all there with him, alive and unharmed.

He felt A-Yuan settle in his lap, leaning back against Wei Wuxian's chest, and let the warmth seep into him.

To be continued...

A/N - ok so this is my first fic in this fandom. And I am not sure how people feel about explicit sex scenes in a story like this? I view sex as a healthy part of adult relationships in a pairing like this, and normally I would explore that in just as much detail as I do the other sides of their relationship. But if there are a lot of readers who are squeamish about it I could keep the fic as M rated and move the other scenes to a separate piece, though it will break the flow a bit, when we get to that part. What are thoughts? I have novel canon vibes for their relationship dynamics, if you are someone who worries about that. Let me know! You can also DM me on BlueSky. (I am KizuKatana there)

Also, I noticed a few questions about whether or not Su She had been killed earlier, and I just wanted to clarify that he chose banishment instead of being whipped by the discipline whip, so he is alive. But he had no authority to order Lan disciples around, since he was banished. So I tried to clarify that a little in this scene.

Chapter 33: Tuned

A/N - In this chapter, we see the full emergence of wwx's intellecutal blind-spot, as actual romance is not an area that he has studied and is therefore not equipped to be an expert on. Based on all of your amazing comments in the last chapter, I have bumped the rating up to E. That will NOT be happening in this chapter, but it WILL be happening before the end. I will mark the relevant chapters in the author notes sections so people who don't like that can skip.

Thanks to ZazGeek for beta-ing this chapter!!

Wei Wuxian noticed that Jiang Cheng's gaze was fixed not just on him, but also on Wen Yuan in his lap. His frown grew fiercer and fiercer as Wei Wuxian fed Wen Yuan from his plate, the child feeling clearly at home with him.

"Whose kid is this?" he demanded angrily, in a way that Wei Wuxian knew meant Jiang Cheng wasn't quite sure what was going on, and was a little upset about it.

Jiang Cheng rapidly scanned the room, his eyes settling on Wen Qing suspiciously.

Wen Qing returned his glare with a cold look of her own, and Jiang Cheng blinked, then turned his glare back towards Wei Wuxian.

Wei Wuxian sprawled back in his chair, his arm around A-Yuan's waist.

"This is my son. I birthed him from my own body," Wei Wuxian said, cheerily, finding familiar enjoyment in the way Jiang Cheng's face was torn between exasperation, shock, and rage. He had missed teasing his little brother so much.

"That's… that's… *Wei Wuxian* !" Jiang Cheng sputtered.

"Impossible?" Wei Wuxian asked, tilting his head to the side. "So was raising an army of undead, but I did that less than a week ago."

Jiang Cheng's expression was almost comically frozen, and it delighted Wei Wuxian to know that his brother actually was *considering the possibility* that Wei Wuxian was not completely full of shit. His gaze skittered between Wei Wuxian, Wen Yuan, and - for some odd reason - Lan Wangji.

"Jiang Cheng! You look so surprised! I've been a rogue cultivator for more than three years now, plenty of time to have birthed my little radish." Wei Wuxian fluttered his eyelashes just for effect.

"A-Xian," Jiang Yanli chided him, though her voice was full of amusement. "Don't tease A-Cheng."

Nie Mingjue let out a guffaw, which snapped Jiang Cheng out of his daze.

“I hate you. If he’s your son, why is he wearing Lan robes?” Jiang Cheng snapped at Wei Wuxian, which caused A-Yuan to shrink back against Wei Wuxian’s chest, his little arms wrapped tightly around his neck.

“Purple-gege is angry?” Wen Yuan asked quietly, but not quietly enough to avoid being heard in a room full of cultivators.

“Purple-gege just likes anger best,” Wei Wuxian said, laughing. “It’s how he says hello, goodbye, and I love you.”

“Wei Wuxian!”

“Oh,” Wen Yuan looked at Jiang Cheng closely for a moment. “Then he must love Xian-gege very much!”

Jiang Yanli lifted her sleeve over her face to cover her laugh, but the rest of the room was not so polite about it. The only one not laughing was Lan Wangji, who was watching Jiang Cheng with narrowed eyes.

“It might not be a bad idea for A-Yuan to be known as your son,” Wen Qing said, thoughtfully, after the laughter had subsided.

Jiang Cheng looked at Wei Wuxian, as though trying to remember something before recognition flared. “Wait. He’s the child from the - “

“Yes,” Wei Wuxian cut him off before he could mention *Xiangliu.* They all avoided bringing up the tragedy that befell his village in front of Wen Yuan if at all possible. The child was resilient, but Wei Wuxian knew how memories like that left deep marks on a child.

Jiang Cheng grimaced, taking a slow breath as he realized his mistake. Wen Ning came over and distracted Wen Yuan by handing him a small grass twirler, that would fly if spun correctly. Wei Wuxian looked at him, gratefully. Wen Ning was often overlooked, growing up in the shadow of his brilliant sister, but no one had a fiercer or more loyal heart than Wen Ning.

“But why can’t he just stay with the Wen?” Jiang Cheng asked, miraculously managing to keep his voice low to not draw attention from A-Yuan.

“I mean… I don’t really know, but aren’t there still a lot of hostilities between the Wen and the other sects?” Nie Huaisang asked, his fan fluttering in front of his lower face.

Wen Qing nodded. “Wen Ning and I were known to be Wen in Cloud Recesses. But Wen Yuan was hidden, and dressed in Lan robes when he was there. We did not specify his family name, but it would have been assumed he was a Lan, or at least from a family within their territory. But now that Wen Yuan is here with us, it will be clear he either belongs to the Wen sect, or is here because of Wei Wuxian. Right now, Wei Wuxian can offer him a lot more protection by claiming him as his son than A-Ning or I could.”

“But how do you explain the Lan robes?” Jiang Cheng asked. “People saw him. The Lan sect will recognize him if they see him again.”

Wei Wuxian leaned over, bumping his shoulder against Lan Wangji.

“Maybe Lan Zhan is the father. He had his wicked way with me on our night hunt!” Wei Wuxian laughed, noticing the way Lan Wangji went rigid next to him, his face like stone. “Ah, Lan Zhan! Don’t be so angry. No one would believe such a terrible rumor about the virtuous Hanguang-Jun!”

Wei Wuxian shrugged, drumming his fingers on the table. “We can just say that he was my child, and that Lan Zhan took him in while I was missing. It wouldn’t be unheard of, since I was in good standing with the Lan at the time and didn’t have a sect of my own. If a child of mine was orphaned, I think… I think Lan Zhan would take him in,” Wei Wuxian ended what had started out as a way to tease Lan Wangji suddenly thinking about how Jiang Fengmian had done exactly that for him.

Jiang Cheng’s expression said he was thinking of the same thing.

“Your son should be a Jiang, not a Lan,” Jiang Cheng replied shortly.

“A-Yuan is wearing Lan robes,” Lan Wangji said, locking eyes with Jiang Cheng.

“Well, it won’t matter that he was wearing Lan robes when your sect has banned me,” Wei Wuxian said. Jiang Cheng looked like he was going to argue for Jiang robes again, but Wei Wuxian continued. “And I was kicked out of the Jiang before that. So I guess A-Yuan should be wearing black robes.”

Neither Lan Wangji nor Jiang Cheng looked pleased with that, but they looked even *less* pleased when Nie Mingjue pointed out that the Nie sect was more than happy to have both Wei Wuxian and Wen Yuan there, so perhaps A-Yuan should wear Nie robes.

Wei Wuxian was not quite sure what to make of the highly amused expression on Nie Mingjue’s face, nor of the slightly terrified expression on Nie Huaisang’s as he looked at Lan Wangji. Wei Wuxian turned towards Lan Wangji to see what was going on, but Lan Wangji’s face was completely blank.

“A-Yuan’s current robes are serviceable. Wastefulness is forbidden,” Lan Wangji said primly. “I will discuss with the elders regarding Wei Wuxian’s ban.”

Nie Mingjue laughed and Wei Wuxian knew he was missing something. A-Yuan let out a shout of delight as he was finally able to get the launcher to fly, sending it directly into Jiang Cheng’s hair.

The child froze for a moment, clearly nervous about whether ‘angry-gege’ would yell at him. Jiang Cheng carefully took the toy from his hair, grumbling a little under his breath, then proceeded to spin it so it flew much higher, almost across the room. Wen Yuan clapped in delight, chasing after it before running back to ask everyone if they’d seen how great Purple-gege was at making it fly.

The tension eased as the adults decided to wait to resume the more serious conversations until after A-Yuan was no longer present. The boy’s happy chatter filled the air as the group of powerful cultivators resumed eating. Wei Wuxian got more than a small amount of amusement from the young Wen refugee basically holding court between the leaders of the Nei, Lan, and Jiang sects.

A-Yuan told Wei Wuxian about how he had played hide-and-seek with the Nie guards (Wei Wuxian wondered if the guards had been actually playing or if A-Yuan was getting into place he shouldn't have been), how he liked the food at the Unclean Realm so much better than at Cloud Recesses.

"They have *chicken* and *pork* , Xian-gege! Every *day* !"

Wei Wuxian told the story of the original Nie Master, who had been a butcher, and Wen Yuan's eyes were wide.

"My friend A-Yi wants to try meat. He said he never had it!"

"A-Yi?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"Lan JingYi. The son of the family that looked after A-Yuan while we were gone," Wen Qing replied.

A-Yuan nodded vehemently. "He is my *best friend* !"

He looked at Wei Wuxian, his smile fading and his lips trembling again. "I'll see him again?"

Wei Wuxian wanted *so badly* to be able to promise he could take A-Yuan to visit his friend, but with the Lan sect elders banning him, and Wen Qing and Wen Ning taking his side, he wasn't sure how to answer. He did not want to lie to the child.

"I will bring you to visit Lan JingYi," Lan Wangji spoke calmly, having finished his meal, though he turned his gaze to Jiang Cheng as soon as he finished speaking.

Jiang Cheng bristled, but A-Yuan's face lit up as he turned to look at Lan Wangji. "And I bring chicken?"

"They don't allow meat in Cloud Recesses," Jiang Cheng said. Wen Yuan's face fell.

Wei Wuxian glared at his brother for making A-Yuan upset.

"Maybe you could bring some chicken to the little cabin that we stayed in just outside of Cloud Recesses?" Wei Wuxian offered, looking at Lan Wangji to see if that could be workable.

"Mm. We would need to ask Lan JingYi's parents, but that would be acceptable," Lan Zhan replied.

"Yes! I will feed him *chicken* !"

Jiang Cheng and Lan Wangji seemed to be having some sort of argument through mutual glaring that Wei Wuxian could not really understand. Jiang Cheng was the one to look away first. Lan Wangji's expression didn't change, but Wei Wuxian thought the man seemed somewhat smug about it.

Wen the meal was finished, Wen Qing stood and announced that it was time for her to examine Wei Wuxian's wounds.

“A-Yuan,” Jiang Yanli said, coming over to crouch gracefully beside Wei Wuxian to speak to the child. “I am going to see if we can find some special cakes to cook for dinner. Would you like to help me?”

A-Yuan happily agreed, wrapping his arms around his ‘Yanli-Jie’ and letting her carry him out of the room towards the kitchens.

The post-war negotiations were still underway as the cultivation world scrambled to fill the power vacuum left by both Wen Ruohan and Jin Guangshan, and everyone had more work to do than would fit in a day. As they stood to take their leave, Jiang Cheng came and pulled Wei Wuxian aside before he disappeared into the medical ward with Wen Qing. Lan Wangji paused, looking at them, but Wei Wuxian waved him on.

“Tell Wen Qing I’ll be there in a minute,” Wei Wuxian said.

Lan Wangji nodded, and left the two brothers alone.

“Look. I know that everyone keeps going on and on about what a fucking *genius* you are, or whatever, but I know you better. Don’t go and do something reckless and stupid and get yourself killed, or I will break your legs.” Jiang Cheng sounded irritated, which was the surest sign of his affection.

“A-Cheng! You wound me! I never do anything reckless or stupid.”

It was a testament to the extent of Wei Wuxian’s injuries that Jiang Cheng didn’t punch him for the nickname.

“You *only* do reckless and stupid things,” Jiang Cheng bit back, though his eyes were worried rather than angry.

“You can come back. To Lotus Pier,” Jiang Cheng said, looking down, his fists clenched at his sides. “If you want.”

Wei Wuxian paused, not quite sure what to say. There were a million reasons why that was a bad idea, starting with the assassination attempts and ending with Madam Yu.

“I’m sect leader now. So it’s my call,” Jiang Cheng said defiantly, even though Wei Wuxian knew just how painful those words must be.

“Jiang Cheng,” Wei Wuxian began. “Thank you. I… you have enough on your plate right now, though. Without dealing with me.”

Jiang Cheng’s jaw worked. They both knew what Wei Wuxian meant, how his presence in Lotus Pier always made things so much harder.

“People know.”

Wei Wuxian frowned, not sure what Jiang Cheng was getting at. Jiang Cheng continued.

“They know. That you tried to warn us. That you… drew the army away. That we’re all alive because of what you did. Mother tried to keep it quiet but they know. Not just the disciples, but the whole town.”

Wei Wuxian blinked at that. Madam Yu’s word had been law for so long. If she had tried to suppress the stories, and they were spread anyway… what did the people of Lotus Pier think of her? If they knew that Wei Wuxian had warned them, then they would know that Madam Yu did not allow them to act on his warning.

Jiang Cheng nodded at whatever he was seeing in Wei Wuxian’s face. “So. I’m just saying. You can come back. They… they want to see you.”

Wei Wuxian gave a slow nod. “I will come. I don’t know when but… I’ll come. If you’re sure.”

Jiang Cheng scoffed, and the mood returned to normal. “I’m not saying *I* want you back. You’re a huge pain in my ass. I’m just saying *some* idiots do, so you should come and pay your respects. Unless you’re too good for the Jiang now?”

Wei Wuxian grinned. “Fuck off. I’ll come. Don’t piss everyone off in negotiations. You’re sect leader now. You can’t be running around like such a hot head.”

“Whatever. Like you know jack shit about being calm in negotiations. You threatened to kill Sect Leader Yao and Lan *Qiren* in the last formal meeting you bothered to show up, so you can shut the fuck up.” Jiang Cheng bumped his shoulder against Wei Wuxian’s, much gentler than he usually did. “Anyway, I have actual work to do. You go take a nap or whatever. But. Come. With your kid.”

Wei Wuxian felt his throat tighten, and all he could do was give a short nod as Jiang Cheng scoffed and stalked off to whatever set of meetings he was needed in to secure the future of the Jiang Sect.

He wondered who had spread the rumors about him in Lotus Pier. Jiang Yanli had been here, Jiang Fengmian was dead, and Madam Yu would rather cut her tongue out. He watched the angry figure of Jiang Cheng disappear from view, a smile tugging at his lips.

“Finally. I was just about to send someone to go get you. Let’s see how far you set yourself back in your healing process,” Wen Qing said brusquely as she motioned for Wei Wuxian to lay down on the bed in the medical ward of the Nie sect. She handed him a cup of the medicinal tea she had been having him drink.

“Ugh. Do I have to drink this now? If I do, I’ll sleep the rest of the afternoon,” Wei Wuxian complained. He knew he was lucky to be alive, but drinking shitty tasting tea that made him sleepy and vulnerable was getting old, fast.

Wen Qing glared at him.“Jiang Guniang told me that you used both yin and yang energy simultaneously when you escaped. The physical strain of flying on your sword carrying another person while your qi was constrained will have worsened the arrow wound, and likely damaged your meridians again.”

Lan Wangji's eyes snapped to Wei Wuxian with a look of almost betrayal, and Wei Wuxian gave a weak laugh, then took a sip of his tea, grimacing at the taste.

"Aiya, Wen Qing! You're making it sound like I did it on purpose." The statement actually was truer than he'd like. Wei Wuxian hadn't thought at all, when the wards had alerted him and he'd awoken to see his Shijie in danger. His body had been in motion before he'd even been able to formulate a thought. It was not exactly comforting.

"Hm," Wen Qing said, unimpressed. She wasted no time jabbing her fingers into Wei Wuxian's wrist, eyes narrowed in concentration as she allowed her qi to flow through his meridians. It was far from the first time she had examined him, so Wei Wuxian was used to her ruthless medical efficiency in assessing her patients. This time, however, it seemed to go on for longer, Wen Qing's frown deepening as the moments passed.

"Finish your tea, then let me see your wound," she said briskly, then proceeded to bat his hands away as he'd moved them to untie his robe, doing it herself with sharp precise movements while Wei Wuxian quickly downed the rest of the tea with a grimace.

The bandage that covered Wei Ying's chest looked cleaner than it should have been, given the amount of time that had passed since he'd last changed it, and he realized that Lan Wangji must have done so while Wei Wuxian slept at some point. The fact that Wei Wuxian hadn't woken during it was… disconcerting.

Wen Qing glared down at Wei Wuxian's wound as if it had personally offended her. Wondering what was going on, Wei Wuxian looked down at his own chest. The hole where the arrow had pierced him looked much better than it had the last time he'd seen it, which made Wen Qing's expression even more puzzling.

"It looks good, right? I mean, it looks much better than it did before," Wei Wuxian said, trying not to feel unsettled at Wen Qing's reaction to his wounds. He knew that dual cultivating with both Yin and Yang energy at the same time was dangerous. It was also unheard of, so there wasn't a lot of medical precedent to go by. He felt ok, but… maybe he wasn't?

"It looks *too* good. What did you do?" Wen Qing asked, moving her fingers to rest above his middle dantian. He could feel the cool tendrils of her spiritual energy entering him, flowing through him. "And your meridians should be much more inflamed after what you did. They're almost healed. The only way I can even tell that you pulled that crazy stunt is that they are slightly wider than they were before."

"Wider? That's good, right?" Wei Wuxian asked. The tea was starting to take effect, and his eyes were growing heavier. "Wider means more energy can move through them more quickly."

"There are downsides if you tried to dual cultivate with someone whose meridians were narrower. They have to balance. Now stop talking. I need to concentrate."

Lan Wangji had moved closer, his expression intent when Wen Qing had mentioned dual cultivation. Wei Wuxian remembered that the Lan elders had been pressuring him to take a cultivation partner before the war. Now that it was over, and all the sects were scrambling to secure alliances and establish a new political hierarchy after the fall of Wen Ruohan and Jin Guangshan, that pressure was likely going to ramp up even more.

No wonder Lan Wangji was worried. The man's core was enormous, and his meridians were likely as flawless as the rest of him. It would be hard for him to find a cultivation partner that really matched him, though Wei Wuxian supposed that the goal of the match had likely shifted from what it had been before the war. Originally, the Lan had wanted to have a shot at one of their cultivators obtaining immortality, or close enough to it. Now it would likely be focused more on just the alliance that a marriage would bring.

Hopefully, Lan Wangji would have some say in it, but Wei Wuxian knew it was unlikely, given that he was a sect heir.

Wei Wuxian was startled out of his thoughts as Wen Qing moved her hand to his lower dantian, and Wei Wuxian had to fight back the urge to deflect his own nerves with an inappropriate joke about her hand placement. Wen Qing was not above using her needles to shut him up if she needed to.

Jiang Yanli entered, nodding in greeting to Lan Wangji.

"Shijie!" Wei Wuxian greeted. "Where is A-Yuan?"

"A-Yuan is napping. Is everything alright?" Jiang Yani asked, her voice concerned.

"Even with a strong golden core, this amount of healing should not be possible," Wen Qing said flatly.

"Um…," Wei Wuxian shrugged, not really sure why Wen Qing looked so displeased that he was healing ahead of schedule. "Well, lucky me?"

"There is no such thing as *luck* , Wei Wuxian!" Wen Qing snapped. "Something must have caused this. If we can find out what it is, then we can use it elsewhere."

"Well, I mean, Lan Zhan passed me spiritual energy. So it wasn't all just my own core."

"Using someone else's spiritual energy would not have caused this, not to this extent."

"But isn't that the whole point of passing energy to someone when they're wounded?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"Of course. But it only works to a certain extent. Otherwise the best doctors would just be the ones with the largest golden cores, not the ones with the most knowledge. It doesn't work that way. In order for the spiritual energy to be able to heal the body, it needs to be absorbed by it. Your own qi is perfectly aligned with your body, so 100% of it is absorbed and able to heal whatever damage it encounters, until it is consumed. Foreign qi can provide the energy, but it's not as easily absorbed so it's much less efficient. It can purge spiritual poisons or toxins, or hold back blood from pouring out wounds by force, but causing the tissue to heal is a very different matter. And healing the meridians within your body is even trickier. It would take a physician of incredible skill to even accomplish a portion of what you've managed."

Wen Qing glared down at Wei Wuxian's body for a moment, as though trying to will it to give up its secrets to her. Several moments passed as they all watched Wen Qing think furiously, trying to understand what had happened. The excellent physician in her could not stand an unsolved mystery like this.

“You said that Hanguang-Jun gave you spiritual energy?” Wen Qing asked eventually, and she raised her eyes to look over to where Lan Wangji stood, watching the proceedings.

“Yeah. Lan Zhan played for me, but also passed me his qi directly,” Wei Wuxian said.

“Show me,” Wen Qing ordered Lan Wangji, completely ignoring propriety in her focus to solve what seemed to be a medical impossibility. “I want to see exactly what you did when you passed your qi to him.”

Fortunately, Lan Wangji did not seem offended as he moved gracefully to Wei Wuxian’s bedside, placing two fingers on Wei Wuxian’s pale wrist. Wen Qing placed her fingers on the other wrist, closing her eyes in concentration as the soft, blue glow began to emanate from Lan Wangji’s fingers.

Wei Wuxian felt the soothing, cool flow enter his body, his eyes fluttering closed almost against his will at how good it felt. He hummed in pleasure, and felt himself drifting. He had to fight to keep awake, but the medicine was making it harder to do so.

Wen Qing’s sharp, indrawn breath was quiet, but still audible in the room.

“He’s tuned to you,” Wen Qing said, her voice soft and almost wondering. “I’ve only read about it in theory, but I’ve never actually seen it. Jiang Guniang, come. Feel this. If you will be caring for your brother, this is something you will need to understand.”

Jiang Yanli walked quickly over, placing her fingers next to Wen Qing’s. Her eyes widened as she felt whatever it was that Wen Qing was directing her to observe.

“Oh!” Jiang Yanli gasped, her eyes looking first to her brother, then to Lan Wangji, before she abruptly looked down and away, her cheeks flushing a light pink. Oddly, Lan Wangji’s ears had turned pink as well. Wei Wuxian felt like he must be missing something.

“Tuned?” Wei Wuxian asked, drowsily. “I mean, Lan Zhan’s qi always feels good. But it’s so perfect that it must feel like that to everyone.”

“It feels… good?” Lan Wangji asked, his voice strange and slightly choked.

“Yeah. I mean, I’m sure you’ve heard this before, Lan Zhan. Anyone you’ve healed would notice it. Your qi is like… it’s the *best* . It feels so good. Like soothing and peaceful, but also warm? It’s just…,” Wei Wuxian struggled to find a word that would convey just how *right* Lan Zhan’s qi felt in his body. He would have it all the time if possible. Of course, that was ridiculous and Lan Wangji had way more important uses of his qi than to waste it on Wei Wuxian, but still. It was *amazing.*

Jiang Yanli coughed and stepped back, releasing her touch on his wrist, her face flushing even darker.

“Wei Wuxian. Please keep your face from doing that in my medical examination room,” Wen Qing said sharply, though it sounded more like she was trying to hide a laugh.

“What face?” Wei Wuxian asked indignantly. “I’m just trying to think of the right word. I’m tired, ok?”

Lan Wangji's face was completely blank and unhelpful, but Wen Qing's expression was filled with a dark amusement that Wei Wuxian could easily read but didn't really make sense.

"Does that mean that Lan Zhan is some sort of healer savant? Does he have some sort of special qi that tunes to everyone's body? Poor Lan Zhan! He's already the best at musical cultivation and sword cultivation, and now everyone is going to be wanting his qi as well!"

Wen Qing gave him a look that told him he was an absolute idiot as she released his wrist.

"Wei Wuxian. I was told that you were a scholar, of sorts. Do not say such stupid things," Wen Qing said after a moment, pinching the bridge of her nose.

"What? I'm just saying, if Lan Wangji's qi feels so -" Wei Wuxian's words were cut off with Wen Qing raising a sharp hand.

"Stop. I do not need to hear more about how Hanguang-Jun's qi feels inside your body."

"You *asked* !" Wei Wuxian turned to look at Lan Wangji for support. This was supposed to be about medical cultivation and - yeah, Wei Wuxian didn't really know anything about it - but they were acting like he was talking about something *illicit.*

Lan Wangji's expression was… something Wei Wuxian had never seen. His golden eyes were slightly wide, somewhere between shock and hope and Wei Wuxian didn't know what was going on. Did Hanguang Jun have some secret desire to be a healer? Wei Wuxian supposed it could make sense, given how hard the man worked trying to help people. If he could also heal so miraculously that even Wen Qing was shocked, then that would be even *more* amazing.

"Wei Wuxian, have you really never read *anything* about the nature of qi compatibility?" Wen Qing said, her voice sounding exasperated. She looked between Wei Wuxian and Jiang Yanli.

Jiang Yanli was the one to answer, sounding almost apologetic.

"We do not study such things in Lotus Pier. The topic is not one that mother preferred to be mentioned in her presence, so the teachers tended to… avoid it. Completely." Jiang Yanli looked uncomfortable. "And I believe, in terms of his own studies, A-Xian has always focused more on talismans and creatures."

Wen Qing rolled her eyes. "Of course he did."

"Hey! I'll have you know that it was my studying those talismans and creatures that figured out the *Xiangliu* !"

Wen Qing's face softened for a moment, and she sighed.

"You're right." She gave Lan Wangji a stern look. "Well, at least one of you seems to know what is going on here. I need to return to the meeting hall before Wen Ning agrees to something ridiculous. Wei Wuxian, you need to rest here for the day to recover from your journey, but you are healed enough to resume light activities tomorrow. But absolutely nothing strenuous until I clear you. Understood?"

Wei Wuxian gave a three finger salute, but ruined the image by yawning. “No night hunting. Got it.”

“No strenuous activities *at all* . I don’t care how good Hanguang Jun’s qi feels, you need to *rest* .” Wen Qing said with a strange emphasis, glaring both at Wei Wuxian and then at Lan Wangji, which was ridiculous because Lan Wangji was never the one who tried to get Wei Wuxian into the dangerous night hunts or assassination attempts. That was always Wei Wuxian.

He sent a confused glance towards Lan Wangji, whose ears were now almost scarlet.

“Lan Zhan?” Wei Wuxian asked, feeling lost, but his eyes were drifting closed.

Wen Qing rolled her eyes. “Unbelievable,” she muttered. Then she turned to Lan Wangji. “You have my sincerest sympathy for being saddled with him.”

Lan Wangji gave a graceful inclination of his head. “I will take care of Wei Ying.”

“Oh, A-Xian,” Jiang Yanli said in the voice she always used when Wei Wuxian did something extremely foolish. He looked over at her, only to find her hiding a laugh behind her sleeve.

Wei Wuxian was tired. Maybe if he took a nap, the conversation that was going on around him would make sense. He relaxed back on the medical bed and felt himself drifting to sleep almost immediately, not focusing very much on the words that were floating past him.

“Hanguang-Jun,” Jiang Yanli said, but her voice had an edge to it that Wei Wuxian was not used to hearing from her. He wanted to open his eyes, but the medicine that Wen Qing had given him was taking effect. “I am sure that you know how much A-Xian means to me. He may be without a sect, currently, but he is not without an older sister.”

“I understand, Jiang Guniang,” Lan Wangji replied, his voice very serious and… formal?

Wei Wuxian was no longer sure if he was awake or asleep.

“I am so glad that you do. My XianXian is very talented, very brave, and - about many things - he is very smart. But he sometimes is not able to see things clearly. He needs other people to look out for his well being. I am one of those people.”

“Mn.”

“So you must be very careful with him. Very clear. I am trusting you to be a man of honor, Hanguang-Jun.”

“I will take care of Wei Ying.”

“This one thanks you, Hanguang-Jun. Please take care of my little brother.”

Wei Wuxian was having the strangest dream.

To be continued...

A/N - I didn't explicitly spell out what being 'tuned' means because wwx does not know/is not familiar with the term. I am guessing that - based on the title of the fic and other context, many of you will have figured it out. Lwj certainly has, and we will see how that affects his actions going forward. The rating change is likely another clue. *smirks*

Chapter 34: The wisdom of older sisters

A/N - This chapter is long for no good reason. But it was fun to write? I love Jiang Yanli so much LOL. Thanks to ZazGeek for beta'ing!

" *Wangji. If you hope to sway the elders, you cannot do it from Qinghe. You must return to Cloud Recesses."*

A slightly familiar voice woke Wei Wuxian from where he was sleeping, coming from the hallway outside the medical ward room.

" *Wei Ying is still recovering."*

That was definitely Lan Zhan's voice. Wei Wuxian opened his eyes. He was alone in the room, the light slanting in the window at an angle that meant it was nearing evening.

" *He is safe in the Unclean Realm. Mingjjue will not let anything happen to him. From what I understand from Wen Guniang, he is nearly recovered."*

There was a longer silence there, and Wei Wuxian carefully levered himself from the bed. He *was* feeling better. He might not be up for full on sword fighting yet, but he certainly was well enough that Lan Wangji didn't need to waste his time here if his sect needed him.

Wei Ying stood and walked over to the door, pulling it open to find Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji standing just outside it. From a casual observer's perspective, both brothers appeared as serene and collected as always. But Wei Wuxian had been in Lan Wangji's presence enough to recognize the stubborn set to his jaw. Intervention appeared to be required.

"Lan Zhan! Zewu Jun! Were you coming to say goodbye before you left?" Wei Wuxian asked cheerfully. He gestured to allow them entry to the sick ward, as though it were his own private quarters. "I'd offer you tea, but all I have currently is the medicine that Wen Qing brews me, and - trust me - you would rather die of thirst than drink it."

Lan Xichen smiled gently, clearly aware of the message Wei Wuxian was trying to send.

"No need, Wei Gongzi. We did not mean to disturb your rest," Lan Xichen replied. "I was just discussing with Wangji as to when he would be returning to Cloud Recesses."

"Wei Ying. You should be resting," Lan Wangji said, ignoring his brother's words.

"Ah, Lan Zhan! I've been sleeping for days. Between you and Wen Qing, I'm almost fully healed!" Wei Wuxian noticed the slightly surprised side-eye that Lan Xichen gave at the comment, but he pushed ahead. "You should return to your duties with your brother. There is still so much to be settled in the meetings now that the war is over. You don't want to leave it all on your brother's shoulders."

Lan Wangjji's lips tensed in a way that made it clear he was Not Pleased. Lan Xichen cast Wei Wuxian a grateful look and turned to his brother.

“Wei Gongzi is wise. Wangji, there is much to be sorted out at home. You will be much more likely to turn the outcome in your favor if you participate in the process.”

After a heavy moment, Lan Wangji relented, giving his brother a short nod.

“Wei Ying will remain here?” Lan Wangji asked.

Wei Wuxian had a feeling that his answer would determine whether Lan Wangji actually left the Unclean Realms without physical intervention, so he decided to interpret ‘here’ in the broadest possible sense.

“Where else would I go? I have A-Yuan with me, and I’m basically banished from all the other major sects.”

Lan Wangji’’s eyes narrowed, and Wei Wuxian knew that he had noticed the dodge.

“Wei Ying.”

“Lan Zhan. I’m fine. I can’t promise to stay in the sick room because no one would believe that.”

“Wei Ying is not yet recovered,” Lan Wangji said intently, stepping forward firmly into Wei Wuxian’s space. Back at Cloud Recesses, Wei Wuxian had constantly faced the anger of Lan Wangji by sitting too close, or brushing against his sleeve. Yet here Lan Wangji was, only inches from Wei Wuxian, well past the personal space boundaries he’d always adhered to so rigidly. During the war, they’d had to share physical space out of necessity, but *only* out of necessity.

“Lan Zhan, ” Wei Wuxian said, taking a step back and glancing over at Lan Xichen, who also looked puzzled. “

“Tell me where you go if you leave.” It was not a request, and the bold demand seemed as out of character to Wei Wuxian as the way that Lan Wangji had initiated physical proximity. What had gotten into Lan Wangji? But then the words clicked.

Ah. Wei Wuxian should have known that his earlier taunt about Lan Zhan not being able to find him if Wei Wuxian chose to disappear would come back to bite him in the ass. The demand was still a little odd, but they’d been rivals in the past, and Wei Wuxian *did* have a habit of doing things like inventing an entirely new form of forbidden cultivation when he disappeared from sight. Part of him felt like he should resent being asked to report his location like a subordinate, but the expression on Lan Wangji’s face wasn’t one of arrogance or suspicion.

And if Wei Wuxian harbored a secret hope that he might run into Lan Wangji on a night hunt or two like they had in the past, then no one had to know about it. Obviously, Lan Wangji would not have much time to do such things, having to take up duties with his sect as the post war politics played out. But there didn’t seem to be a risk in letting him know where he was, given all Wei Wuxian planned on doing was night hunting or maybe visiting Lotus Pier, at some point, once things stabilized.

“I’ll let Nie Mingjue know when I come and go. If you need me for something, you will be able to find me. As long as it’s not to drag me back to your sect elders for violating their rules.”

Wei Wuxian was only half joking with the second part. He knew that Lan Wangji would defend him, but - in the end - Lan Wangji had always been the number one follower of his sect's rules and his elders' edicts. There was a reason he had been head of discipline when he was younger. Wei Wuxian didn't know what Lan Wangji would do if his elders ordered him to bring Wei Wuxian back for punishment, but he did not want to put the man in the position of choosing between his friendship with Wei Wuxian and his loyalty to the Lan sect. It was clear which one Lan Wangji would choose, but Wei Wuxian knew it would be hard on the man.

Lan Wangji was studying his face, and Wei Wuxian wondered what he read from it. Whatever it was, Lan Wangji did not look happy.

"Wangji. They are expecting us." Lan Xichen's voice had a warning note in it that Wei Wuxian was not sure was directed at the conversation they were currently having or just a reminder that they were already very delayed and had duties to attend to.

Lan Wangji held Wei Wuxian's gaze for an extended moment, looking like he was going to say something. In the end, whatever words Lan Wangji had been wanting to say could not make it past his lips, and he turned and left with his brother.

Wei Wuxian watched them gracefully sweep from the room, feeling unsettled and on edge, as though something had almost happened but then, somehow, hadn't.

Wei Wuxian spent the next two days wandering around the Unclean Realm looking for things to do that didn't utterly exhaust him, avoiding Wen Qing's needles and playing with A-Yuan. He also spent much of his time trying to avoid any and all thoughts relating to the contents of the book that Wen Qing had left by the bed in the guest room he had been moved to after being cleared to leave the medical ward.

His face heated in embarrassment just remembering the page on dual cultivation that Wen Qing had left the marker in the book for him to read that morning. Evidently, everyone in the sickroom had been aware of what Wei Wuxian's being 'tuned' to Lan Wangji had meant, except for Wei Wuxian himself.

While dual cultivation is often practiced by cultivators, it does not always show the dramatic impact on cultivation prowess nor longevity that is discussed in theoretical cases. As mentioned above, the balance of qi between the two partners would need to be equal for maximum benefit. However, there are many lower level cultivators where this criteria is met, and still, few achieve more than a small to moderate increase in power and longevity.

One explanation is that our bodies put up barriers to intrusion from outside ourselves, the way a scab and then a scar forms following an intrusion of a foreign object into the flesh, making it harder for future entry. With spiritual pathways, the same could be true, allowing an initial full exchange of qi, but diminishing returns over time as the cultivator's spiritual pathways become more resistant to absorbing the foreign qi over time.

In the extremely rare cases where this does not occur, and larger increases in cultivation power are observed, or in the theoretical case of cultivating to immortality through dual cultivation, it would require at least one of the cultivators to be 'tuned' to the other, where they recognize their partner's qi as they do their own, with no barriers.

Some speculate that this could be possible only between true soul mates, where the spirits themselves are tied and the qi of one would recognize the qi of the other as its own. Others suggest that it could be one-sided, if the receiving person has full and absolute trust and belief in belonging to the other, or the other belonging to them, on a soul-deep level. They would have to be open to accepting that person's qi completely, with no physical, emotional, mental, nor spiritual resistance to the other's presence in their bodies.

This would manifest not only in the ability of their cultivation partner to greatly enhance both their spiritual pathways and core development, but also could result in wound healing as the body recognizes their partner's qi as it would their own on a physical level and not just a spiritual one. A cultivator who is tuned to another cultivator has fully opened themselves to that person, on all levels, in a way that could be considered a soul bond.

The tremendous theoretical benefits of having such a cultivation partner are weighted by the low probability of the existence of such matches. This healer has never observed it, directly, and therefore is skeptical of its basis in fact.

Wei Wuxian remembered the way Lan Wangji's ears had burned red when Wen Qing had mentioned it. If Lan Wangji associated it with soul mates or words like 'belonging to' another, then it was a wonder the man hadn't stormed out of the room. He certainly would have when they were younger. Wei Wuxian breathed out an embarrassed laugh as he remembered the cold fury that Lan Wangji had expressed in the past when Wei Wuxian had called him beautiful or complimented him on his prowess with the blade or his studies. But he supposed that war put everything in perspective, and Lan Wangji would not let such things bother him like he had before.

At the time, Wei Wuxian had been annoyed that everyone was dancing around the implication of Wen Qing's words, but - now that he understood - he was glad that they had not forced the conversation right in front of his sister and Lan Wangji. At least Jiang Cheng hadn't been there.

He had teased Wei Wuxian mercilessly back in Cloud Recesses about how much he was always talking about Lan Wangji, admiring his strength, his looks, his skills, his… everything. Wei Wuxian still firmly believed that most people admired the pristine Second Jade of GusuLan as much as he did and were just quieter about it. After all, Lan Wangji was ranked second on the list of most eligible bachelors for male cultivators. Clearly Wei Wuxian was not the only one who noticed his skills.

Except, *evidently* , he was the only one who admired Lan Wangji so much that his body accepted the man's qi with complete trust and acceptance on a fucking *spiritual* level. He felt his face heat again in embarrassment at being betrayed by his own body like that.

Wei Wuxian wondered if maybe multiple people would be tuned in the same way to Lan Wangji. It was clear that it was not a common phenomena, so it wasn't like people knew for sure. And if it was - at its core - a matter of trust, well… who wouldn't trust Lan Zhan absolutely? Was Wei Wuxian's response really *that* strange? Lan Wangji was the most honorable person that Wei Wuxian knew, and he suspected that anyone who had fought beside Hanguang-Jun for any amount of time would react the same. The healer who had written the book had never had the chance to observe it directly, so it wasn't like anyone would know for sure how it worked. After all, it wasn't like there were a lot of Hanguang-Juns in the world. Maybe everyone would react this way, if given the chance to be healed by Hanguang-Jun.

He said as much to Wen Qing when he returned her book to her. She had given him a scathing look and then turned and left the room without a word. Wei Wuxian hadn't seen her since, but he hadn't actually been looking.

It was the following day and Wei Wuxian was sitting outside in the courtyard, watching A-Yuan play with one of the smaller, wooden practice blades that the younger Nie disciples used. He was still too small to carry it properly, but he was enjoying jumping around and shouting battle cries. The boy had been inseparable from him, even sleeping in his bed at night. Wei Wuxian didn't mind. He remembered the ceaseless terror when he'd first arrived at the Jiang's that everything would disappear if he wasn't vigilant enough, and he'd find himself back on the streets, hungry and afraid and alone. He had been only slightly older than A-Yuan at the time.

He hoped he would be able to help A-Yuan move past that fear better than he himself had ever managed to do.

So he didn't mind sitting in the courtyard and watching A-Yuan play rather than handing the child off to a servant to babysit. Wei Wuxian was banned from practicing sword forms until Wen Qing cleared him, and - since he was currently avoiding her - it was unclear when that would change. Wei Wuxian sensed a motion from the corner of his eye, and turned to see Jiang Yanli walking towards him from the far side of the courtyard.

"Shijie!" he called out, waving to her. A-Yuan didn't even take notice, so caught up in the imaginary battle he was fighting.

"A-Xian," she returned, much more sedately but with a smile that was full of happiness to see him that more than made up for it.

She sat beside him, watching A-Yuan play with a gentle smile on her lips.

"He reminds me of you," Jiang Yanli said. "So full of energy, always in motion."

Wei Wuxian felt a surge of warmth, though he knew for a fact he'd been so much more poorly behaved than A-Yuan could ever be.

"Where have you been?" he asked, deflecting somewhat from the feelings that thinking of his childhood always brought. " I was looking for you just before lunch. A-Yuan and I had a picnic in the yards and we were going to invite you."

Jiang Yanli's eyes lit up.

"Oh, I would have loved to. I'm sorry I missed it. Zixuan came to bring news to Sect Leader Nie, and I was with them for most of the morning and through lunch. We will have to do it again another time when I can join."

The thought of his sister spending time with the Peacock didn't make him as angry as it used to. It was hard to hold a grudge against a man who gave up (at least temporarily) his entire birth right to protect her. But Wei Wuxian had appearances to maintain, so he offered his sister a grumpy pout and grumbled.

“Yeah. He had to see Sect Leader Nie? Sure. He’s the head of the Jin and he can’t afford a messenger to carry his news and has to deliver it in person? I think we both know who he *really* came to see.”

Jiang Yanli blushed prettily, but she didn’t deny it.

“Zixuan said he is making progress in weeding out the Jin who are still loyal to his father. Luo Qinyang has been leading the efforts. Zewu-Jun has asked Hanguang-Jun to coordinate with her to understand the Lan involvement.”

Wei Wuxian nodded thoughtfully. “Mianmian is a good choice. She’s smart and firmly on the Peacock’s side.”

He felt relief that the corruption inside the Jin sect was being taken head-on. He knew it was only a matter of time before Jiang Yanli was married into the sect and living in Koi Tower. He’d feel a lot better if Mianmian and Lan Wangji were leading the charge on taking out whoever was responsible for the attack on her, and who was still loyal to Jin Guangshan in general.

“I had thought that Zewu-Jun didn’t want Lan Zhan involved in the investigation,” Wei Wuxian said, remembering the initial conversation where Lan Wangji had seemed ready to personally hunt Su She down to mete out justice.

“Something must have changed his mind,” Jiang Yanli shrugged gracefully. The internal workings of the Lan sect were not their business.

Wei Wuxian didn’t know Zewu-Jun well, but the man had a reputation for being thoughtful but firm in his decisions. That had certainly been Wei Wuxian’s experience with him, so he wondered a bit at the change. But there was a happy glow about his sister that was clear in the afternoon sunlight, and Wei Wuxian decided to investigate that instead of pondering questions he would likely never get answers to.

“So you spent the morning with the Peacock. I’m guessing it wasn’t all about sect investigations and post-war politics? “

Jiang Yanli blushed again slightly, but did not bother to lie. “No. Zixuan has formally asked Jiang Cheng to renew our betrothal as part of the efforts to strengthen alliances now that the war is over.”

“You’re not just some political bargaining chip!” Wei Wuxian said, feeling his temper flare darkly. If Jiang Cheng or that asshole Jin Peacock thought that Shijie was just -

“A-Xian. Calm down. It’s ok,” Jiang Yanli’s soft voice penetrated the dark anger that was bubbling inside him. She laid a gentle hand on his forearm. “Zixuan isn’t viewing me as that. He stood against his father and his entire sect for me.”

Wei Wuxian drew a slow, calming breath. That was true. He had seen it with his own eyes. The anger inside him slowly faded away like mist.

“He wasn’t trying to pressure you into moving to Koi Tower sooner, was he?”

“No,” Jiang Yanli gave a soft smile. “He wants to make sure it’s safe. He was very grateful that Wen Guniang had taken me on for training. He said…,” Jiang Yanli’s blush deepened. “He said he cares very much for my safety.”

“As he should,” Wei Wuxian said staunchly. There was no denying how happy Jin Zixuan’s obvious concern for her wellbeing made her. Wei Wuxian smiled at his sister’s joy. “Just as long as he admits what he really feels for you, and treats you accordingly. He’d better worship the ground you walk on.”

Jiang Yanli laid a delicate hand on his cheek. “He does. He made his feelings very clear. He will take good care of me.”

Something in the blush on his sister’s face caught Wei Wuxian’s attention.

“He better not have made it *too* clear. He has to be respectful to my Shijie, or he’ll answer to me. Sect leader or no,” Wei Wuxian grumbled, but there was no real heat nor threat in it. Jiang Yanli was positively glowing with happiness. It was all he and Jiang Cheng had ever wanted for her.

“Speaking of feelings,” Jiang Yanli began, her eyes taking on the light of mischief that she used to get when they would play as children. “I understand that Wen Guniang left you a textbook yesterday.”

Wei Wuxian groaned, letting his head fall back. “Shijie is so mean! I can’t believe you’re bringing that up.”

Jiang Yanli looked at him, her soft eyes full of amusement but also a bit of confusion.

“I know that my XianXian has always been more interested in fighting monsters and inventing talismans, but aren’t you even just a little bit happy? Finding your soulmate is so rare.”

“We’re not soulmates!” Wei Wuxian said.

Jiang Yanli’s eyes widened in surprise, and Wei Wuxian rushed on to explain.

“The book. It said that soul mates are just one *theory* . It can also be a sign of complete openness and trust to the other person.”

Jiang Yanli frowned.

“But that level of trust, to have your body react to their qi as if it were your own, surely that is not something that can happen outside of a soul bond?”

Wei Wuxian felt panic and adrenaline racing through him, along with a type of confused anxiousness that he didn’t really understand.

“Lan Zhan and I have a bond. We’ve battled two legendary creatures together, with the Tortoise of Slaughter and then the *Xiangliu* . He was by my side during the war. He has healed me numerous times. It makes sense that I would trust him, that my body would recognize his qi as… as *safe,* or whatever.”

Jiang Yanli seemed thoughtful, but also somewhat skeptical.

“But it’s more than that, isn’t it? I mean, I remember when you were in Cloud Recesses. Lan Wangji was all you would talk about. You seemed… well. You seemed *interested* in him.”

“Well, yeah! I mean, who wouldn’t be! He was the first person my age I’d ever met who could match me with the sword or in the classroom. Lan Zhan is amazing! Of course I was interested in him!”

Jiang Yanlie bit her lip, seeming to hesitate, but then she straightened her spine and pushed on. “A-Xian. I mean interested as in *romantically* .”

Wei Wuxian’s mind briefly blanked in shock, then he laughed.

“Romantically? With Lan Zhan? Shijie, he *hated* me. I was constantly annoying him and I was doing it on purpose just to get a reaction from him. I wasn’t writing him poetry or sending him flowers.”

Except, Wei Wuxian remembered suddenly, he sort of had. But it had all been in jest. He just… he had just been teasing Lan Wangji. Because it made the icy Second Jade so mad, and made him stop ignoring Wei Wuxian. Nothing else ever got a reaction out of him. Wei Wuxian would watch Lan Wangji’s face so closely every time he sent a paperman his way or draped an arm across the rigid, white-robed shoulders to see even the tiniest way Lan Wangji’s ears would blush or his eyes would narrow.

He pulled himself out of his reveries to see his sister watching him closely.

“You’ve seen me flirt with all the pretty sisters in the markets at Lotus Pier. I never did anything like that with Lan Zhan.”

Jiang Yanli waved her hand dismissively.

“A-Xian was never serious when he was flirting with the girls. You just liked to see them blush and smile, and they went through the rest of their day feeling happy to have been noticed by someone as handsome as my little brother. But it never meant anything.”

Wei Wuxian had to look away from the penetrating gaze of his sister, so he turned to watch A-Yuan, who had - at some point - stopped his imaginary battle and was now crouched down and talking to what looked to be some sort of green caterpillar that was inching its way across the stone courtyard.

People always underestimated Jiang Yanli, thinking of her as the ‘least’ of the Jiang children. The least powerful, the least strong, the least intimidating.

They were all fools. Jiang Yanli could see through people like no one else. Her power might not lay in cultivation, but it was no less potent.

It was true that Wei Wuxian never really felt any desire to follow through on the casual flirting he engaged in like breathing. It *was* just for fun, to bring a little lightness into a harsh reality. Sometimes, the girls he flirted with would flirt back, even offering to meet somewhere later, but Wei Wuxian had always just smiled and said he would never take advantage. He had never really been tempted. He had never flirted with *intent* . It just… was never something he was interested in or thought particularly about.

But that didn't mean that he had been flirting with Lan Zhan, either. He had just… he had just been trying to provoke him. It wasn't flirting. Wie Wuxian was very sure that it hadn't been flirting.

"I'm not trying to upset you, A-Xian," Jiang Yanli said gently.

Wei Wuxian couldn't quite turn to look at her, but he pasted on one of his best smiles.

"No! Shijie, you're not upsetting me. I just… you just are asking me a question. It's fine, but that's not what it was. I admire Lan Zhan, and I love night hunting with him. And I trust him, but so does everyone. He's the most reputable cultivator I know, and everyone agrees. That doesn't make us soulmates. I think most people feel that way about him. I'm just louder about it. Plus, I'm pretty sure that soul mates are supposed to be mutual, and I know he doesn't feel anything like that for me."

Jiang Yanli was silent for a moment. Wei Wuxian could see her pursing her lips in his peripheral vision, trying to choose her words carefully, like she did when they were children and Wei Wuxian was not understanding something about the world and she was trying to find the best way of phrasing it.

"I think that Hanguang-Jun is a man who does not show his emotions easily. So we cannot say what he does or does not feel right now. But what about you? A-Xian, have you really, honestly never felt anything but friendship towards him? You seemed to want to be near him a lot. More than you do with other people."

Wei Wuxian would not have answered this question from anyone other than his Shijie, but he owed it to her to take the question seriously.

"I don't… think so? I mean, yeah, I want to be near him. As soon as I met him, I wanted to be his best friend. I liked the challenge of sparring with him, and having someone who could compete with me. And later, when we were fighting the Slaughter Tortoise together, he was amazing. On a night hunt, I always know I can trust him, not just because he is so strong but also... He just is so *steadfast* . He's not going to panic or do something stupid. But I think anyone would want to night hunt with him. And he holds himself so still, so contained all the time. It's fun to try to see what would make him crack, what would make him react somehow. So I pester him. Who wouldn't want to make him react? Who wouldn't want to be near him? I think probably everyone does. I'm just the only one shameless enough to actually *do* it."

Jiang Yanli let out a small laugh.

"Oh, A-Xian. I admire Hanguang-Jun very much, but I have no urges at all to stand close to him, or get his attention to make him react. I am grateful for the work he does, and admire his cultivation levels, but in the same way I do his brother, or Red Blade Master."

Wei Wuxian tore his gaze from A-Yuan and looked at his sister in surprise. He couldn't understand anyone finding Red Blade Master or Zewu Jun nearly as interesting as Lan Zhan. It didn't really make sense to him. Lan Zhan was… was… so much more fun to tease and… something else. Lan Zhan was just *more.* Even if Zewu-Jun outranked him on that stupid list, or Red Blade Master was thought to be more powerful. Lan Zhan was just...

"Hm," was all Wei Wuxian could say.

“A-Xian,” Jiang Yanli said gently. “I know we have never discussed this. And I doubt Mother or Father have ever spoken to you of it. But have you never thought of, ah,-,” she cut off, drawing a slightly embarrassed breath before pushing ahead. “Have you ever thought about things like kissing Lan Wangji?”

Wei Wuxian’s face felt like it was on fire.

“No! Oh, my god, Shijie, how can you even say something like that!”

Wei Wuxian was on much more solid ground now. He had never even *once* thought about kissing Lan Zhan.

“Lan Zhan isn’t like that! He’s too pure and good. There are whole *sets* of rules in the Lan sect about not doing that sort of thing. No one should be thinking about him that way!”

Jiang Yanli blinked, and seemed at a bit of a loss.

“A-Xian. Lan Wangji is, indeed, a very good man. But he is still a man, of flesh and blood. And it would be only natural to-”

“ *No* . Really, Shijie just… no. It’s not like that.” Wei Wuxian cut her off, feeling like somehow the entire conversation had gone into an alien realm where nothing made any sense.

He was absolutely not going to have the sex talk with his sister involving Lan Wangji. Just. No. His skin felt hot and three sizes too small for his body and his insides were twisting in a way that made him feel light-headed. He had grown up under the shadow of a war that had been looming. Sure, he’d read some of Nie Huaisang’s spring books, because *everyone* did and he didn’t want to be ignorant about a topic that others often discussed, but it was never something he felt was particularly relevant to his life.

Wei Wuxian was a weapon, being sharpened for an upcoming war. His duty was to the Jiang, to be their blade and protect Lotus Pier and Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli. He had planned to grow up to be Jiang Cheng’s right hand man. He was the son of a servant, not the heir to a sect. Everything he had he owed to the Jiangs.

The idea of romance or marriage really didn’t even occur to him. That was for other people, like Shijie. Not for Wei Wuxian. Even when he’d been banished and his future plans were wiped clean, he just… hadn't thought about it.

Kissing Lan Zhan?

Wei Wuxian tried to blank the image that the words evoked from his mind. It wasn’t that it was repulsive or anything but it just.. That was not something he should be thinking about.

Kissing Lan Zhan.

Wei Wuxian definitely needed to stop picturing it. Lan Zhan was too pure and too good for anyone to be sullying him with those kinds of carnal thoughts.

No.

He drew a slow breath, trying to banish the image. But Wei Wuxian's brain had never been good about things that were supposed to be 'off limits'. It had gotten him into trouble a lot when he was a child, and his mental discipline had not improved with age.

He was vaguely aware of his sister sitting calmly beside him as he went through an existential crisis.

He would *not* think about kissing Lan Zhan.

He would not think about how soft Lan Zhan's lips always looked, so pink and smooth and perfectly still.

No. He was not thinking about it.

A'Yuan called to him from across the yard and began running over. Wei Wuxian heaved a sigh of gratitude when A-Yuan ran up to show them his new caterpillar friend, and to enquire about snacks.

Jiang Yanli did not bring it up again, but he could feel her watching him. His sister was a wise woman. She knew that she had planted the seed in his mind, and now his mind was going to pick at it and pick at it until it sprouted into whatever fully developed set of thoughts it was meant to be.

If Wei Wuxian didn't love her so much, he would curse her for how well she knew him. She had set his whole world on end with a single conversation.

He couldn't wait to be allowed to go night hunting again. He needed to do something to burn off the nearly unbearable deluge of restless energy that was surging through his system at these wholly unwelcome thoughts.

The fact that the thought of night hunting made him think of night hunting with Lan Zhan did not help at all.

To be continued…

A/N - So... now there will be THOUGHTS happening. *smirks* And you know the saying. Thoughts become actions. Actions become habits. Habits become wangxian married with a son. Wait, that's not a saying? Oh, well.

Chapter 35: Memories that shift and bind

A/N - ok, so one half of the enormous blinders that Wei Wuxian has been wearing has been removed by Jiang Yanli. The other half will require removal by someone else. As always, thank you to ZazGeek for being my beta on this chapter!

Wei Wuxian lay in his bed that night, laying in the soft, thin sleeping robe that Nie Huaisang had given him to change into, *not thinking about kissing Lan Wangji.*

He was not.

It was just that his mind was still reeling from the conversation he'd had with Jiang Yanli in the afternoon. He had managed to keep any thoughts on the matter at bay for most of the day. He never thought he would be grateful for Lan Wangji's absence, but he had no idea how he was going to face the man with his mind still running riot with the ideas that his Shijie had skillfully planted in him.

He had spent the day with A-Yuan, who had been inseparable from him since his arrival, alternating between wanting to play with him or tell him hilarious random details about the time he'd spent in Cloud Recesses. Wei Wuxian still felt guilty for having pulled the child from his friend, but A-Yuan seemed ok with the promise that he would be able to visit him sometime.

Everyone had told Wei Wuxian how much the child had missed him, and the way A-Yuan followed him around like a playful, chattering duckling made it clear how much the boy had become attached to him. Wen Yuan had been upset when Wen Qing had said he was not allowed to sleep in Wei Wuxian's bed, as the child was a restless sleeper and if he accidentally kicked Wei Wuxian's wound, it would set his healing back. A-Yuan had cried and cried, and they'd finally settled on putting them both in adjoining rooms, with Wei Wuxian staying with the child until he fell asleep and promising to be there when A-Yuan woke.

The child's palpable fear of being separated again from Wei Wuxian tore at the rogue cultivator's heart. Wen Qing said that it wasn't uncommon in situations of extreme trauma for a child to want to be with the person who had saved them. Wen Yuan felt safest when he was near Wei Wuxian, and that was a responsibility that Wei Wuxian would not take lightly.

He wondered what Wen Yuan saw in him that made the boy feel safe, when most people looked at Wei Wuxian and saw only danger.

Wei Wuxian would do his best to live up to the trust that the small boy had placed in him. His day had been spent thinking about how he could live up to that new and somewhat unexpected responsibility. He did not want to repeat his parents' mistake of being a rogue cultivator with no home, no safe place to leave a child when he went on a dangerous hunt. Wen Yuan had suffered enough, and Wei Wuxian would make sure he did not add to that. A permanent home base would mean either becoming wealthy enough that he could buy a property somewhere, or joining a sect.

Jiang Cheng would allow Wei Wuxian back into the sect. The young sect leader had made that clear. But then A-Yuan would be living in Lotus Pier with Madam Yu, and Wei Wuxian did not want to put him through that. He could not imagine a world where Madam Yu was kind to a child who was under his care.

The Wen sect was a sect in name only, and its future was uncertain. Wei Wuxian would not deny Wen Yuan access to his homeland, but - for now - it was not a place for a small child. The Jin sect was not even worth mentioning, given that the assassination attempt had emerged from there, and the Lan sect had banished him.

That left the Nie sect. Wei Wuxian admired Nie Mingjue, and was friends with Nie Huaisang. It wouldn't be the worst option, but it was a big decision to make. Nie Mingjue was not pushing for anything permanent, and seemed happy enough to have Wei Wuxian as a visiting rogue cultivator for now. So there was no urgency, but the future stretched out uncertainly before him and A-Yuan.

Wei Wuxian's mind had been occupied with these thoughts throughout most of the day, and he was grateful for the reprieve. But now, alone in his room with no distractions, the conversation he'd had earlier with his Shijie was surfacing again.

His precious Shijie , who had turned his world upside down by asking the simple question of whether he had ever thought about kissing Lan Wangji.

And while Wei Wuxian had never actually done so in the past, it now seemed to be the only thing his mind wanted to consider. Except it wasn't just kissing Lan Zhan that now filled Wei Wuxian's imagination. That would have been disruptive enough. But - instead - his brain was going through all of his past interactions with Lan Wangji and searching for clues as to how long Wei Wuxian had felt this way. It was as though a curtain had been pulled aside, and memories that had been familiar were now filled with new facets and details that Wei Ying had never let himself think too much about before.

Wei Wuxian blew out a harsh breath, the restless buzzing in his mind and body making it clear that sleep would be a long time in coming. He had taken a long bath, hoping that would leech away some of the tension, but it hadn't helped. He had been too distracted to bother with tying his hair up, so it was loose, spilling across the pillows. The way he kept shifting meant it would likely be tangled by morning, but that was a problem for future Wei Ying. Current Wei Ying was trying to get his mind to quiet down enough that he had at least *some* chance of sleep, but it wasn't cooperating.

Normally, Wei Wuxian thrived on having a mind that was quick and agile, able to take facts and observations from seemingly random events and fit them together into new ideas and insights that no one else could see.

At the current moment, however, Wei Wuxian wished he had several jars of alcohol to make his brain shut the fuck up. The random memories and images it was pulling up were causing a thousand tangled and impossibly large emotions to twist inside him.

Wei Wuxian had always felt a sort of… pull from Lan Wangji. He had always wanted his attention, to have the man's golden eyes notice him, to get him to react. To impress him with

Wei Wuxian's skills.

Now, Wei Wuxian realized he wanted… Wei Wuxian threw one arm over his eyes and clenched the other over his flat stomach.

He wasn't sure what he wanted.

Not exactly.

It wasn't as though he could really see him or Lan Wangji courting each other the way they did in Nie Huaisang's novels, with flowers and fancy accessories and meaningless compliments. Those things really held no interest at all for Wei Wuxian, and probably less so for Lan Wangji.

Wei Wuxian's feelings for Lan Wangji were not soft or gentle the way that many of the classic tales of romance seemed to be, whether between a man and a woman, or even those between two men. So much of his and Lan Wangji's interactions were tied with battles and competition that the idea of gentle wooing didn't really make any sense, or even feel particularly relevant.

He didn't want Lan Wangji to treat him the way that Jin Zixuan now (finally) treated Jiang Yanli, with sweet deference, awkward compliments, and showy gifts. Wei Wuxian actually had no interest in that from *anyone* . And he had always assumed that meant he had no interest in other things as well.

But after his conversation with his sister that morning, Wei Wuxian had come to admit that he was definitely interested in kissing Lan Wangji, so that meant that there *were* things other than night hunting and competing for cultivation prowess that he wanted. But also, somehow, entwined with those things.

Wei Wuxian had always been impressed by Lan Wangji's strength. During their battle with the Slaughter Tortoise, Wei Wuxian had watched Lan Wangji strangle the beast for hours (while Wei Wuxian was hanging onto the strange sword he'd found inside the beast's belly, trying not to die), the man's arms corded with muscles as he strained against the gigantic creature and won. The sheer physicality of Lan Wangji had struck Wei Wuxian at the time, and he remembered feeling somewhat in awe of the man.

There was something compelling about the strength and steadfastness of the Second Jade, even at the young age they had been for that fight, had stuck a chord within Wei Wuxian. Lan Wangji would not flinch away from a battle because it was impossibly hard or he was exhausted.

Wei Wuxian had never met someone else his age who could match him in that. At the time, Wei Wuxian had only daydreamed about how much fun it would be to night hunt with Lan Zhan again in the future, knowing he could rely on him.

Looking at the feelings that Wei Wuxian had - at the time - defined in the category loosely as admiration, he realized that it was not only that. There was a darker edge to how he felt when he thought about Lan Wangji's strength. How his arms and shoulders looked as his robes clung to him, damply, at the end of the battle.

What the muscles beneath that pale, smooth skin might feel like, to the touch.

How it might feel to have Lan Wangji matching him in ways outside of night hunting. Not a gentle sort of courtship, but something much more forceful. Wei Wuxian was arguably now the most powerful cultivator alive, his cultivation able to control a literal army.

But the thought… the *knowledge* that Lan Wangji had the strength to pin him down...

Wei Wuxian felt his body tighten in anticipation, his heart racing and his skin prickling.

Yeah. He could admit, at least in his own mind, that he wanted that. Possibly had wanted it for a very long time. It would explain why he loved provoking the Second Jade to anger when most people did almost anything to avoid it.

His face flushed in embarrassment as his treacherous mind produced a different memory, one that edged closer to things that Wei Wuxian had never really considered before but might be considering now. While it was true that Lan Wangji had never touched him outside of necessity, it was also true that Lan Wangji *had* touched him. Wei Wuxian knew what those large hands felt like on his body. Not in a *romantic* way, but… knowledge was knowledge.

The memory of what had happened after Wei Wuxian had nearly been killed by the *Xiangliu* definitely embarrassed him, and stung his pride a bit, but…

It was also a memory that sent a slow curl of heat seeping into his belly as he lay sprawled on the bed. Wei Wuxian splayed his fingers across his stomach, feeling the smooth, flat muscles of his own beneath his palm as he thought about how Lan Wangji's hand compared with his own.

Wei Wuxian had grabbed Lan Wangji's hand, noticing how much larger it was than his own, feeling the hardness of the calluses that Lan Wangji had built from years of wielding his sword. Lan Wangji's grip tightened, and Wei Wuxian found himself pulled up onto Bichen.

"I carried Wei Ying to Cloud Recesses," Lan Wangji had said, evoking an image in Wei Wuxian's mind of being held and carried by Lan Wangji for hours, while he was bloody and dirty and unconscious, held against Lan Wangji's pristine robes. Wei Wuxian hadn't really known what to think about that so he had decided not to think at all.

The Wei Wuxian of the past had been able to push the thoughts down, but the current Wei Wuxian was not as lucky. The thought of Lan Wangji, fresh from finishing the job of killing the *Xiangliu* that Wei Wuxian had started, picking him up and holding him close as he flew them back to Cloud Recesses had been embarrassing at the time, but now, it was…

Wei Wuxian had no memory of it, of course, but his imagination was more than up to the job. He tried hard to not think about how it would feel to be held by Lan Zhan, pressed close to his body, how the scent of sandalwood that always lingers on the man's clothes would be so much stronger. Lan Wangji's scent had always been solid and soothing, but thinking of it now, it was the opposite of soothing. The muscles in Wei Wuxian's stomach clenched, and his throat worked as he tried to fight down a spike of arousal that lanced through his body.

It was well known that Lan Wangji hated physical contact with others. It only took one icy glare from those golden eyes to make his point known, and everyone gave him a wide berth. Wei Wuxian had many memories of Lan Wangji jerking away from his outstretched hands or stepping back sharply when Wei Wuxian got too close when they were younger, so he knew he was not a true exception to the rule, but the few times that Lan Wangji had allowed contact were

indelibly seared in Wei Ying's mind. Now, after Jiang Yanli's seemingly harmless question about whether Wei Wuxian had ever thought about kissing Lan Wangji, they were crashing back into his consciousness with an entirely new, unsettling awareness that made Wei Wuxian's skin feel hot and tight across his body.

Another image flashed, from when they had killed Wen Chao. Wei Wuxian had stumbled after touching *Suibian* for the first time after the Burial Mounds and Lan Wangji had caught him.

Wei Wuxian had felt a large hand close around his upper arm, supporting him, and another at his back. He took a moment to just steady his breathing before he could open his eyes.

Lan Wangji had slid an arm around his waist, and the heat from Lan Wangji's hands had felt soothing, though Wei Wuxian couldn't really understand why at the time. Lan Wangji hadn't been putting any spiritual energy into him.

Wei Wuxian shuddered slightly at the ghost of Lan Zhan's hold on his body, his breath coming faster. The hand that had been splayed across his stomach dropped to the bed and fisted into the sheets to ground him. How was he ever going to face Lan Wangji after this? What if Lan Wangji had to touch him again? It would be humiliating, because there was no way that Lan Wangji could touch him and Wei Wuxian would react the same as he had in the past. Wei Wuxian would tense or flinch or - god forbid - *blush* , and then Lan Wangji would know, and it would make everything unbearably awkward.

Even worse would be if Lan Wangji needed to heal him. Wei Wuxian felt his level of mortification reach a new height when he thought about how he had gone on and on about how good Lan Wangji's qi felt inside him. No wonder everyone had looked uncomfortable. Well, at least Wei Wuxian could blame at least some of his rambling on the medication. There was no hiding the fact that he trusted and admired Lan Wangji, but he hoped he could at least keep it hidden that it was… more than that. There were platonic soul mates. He could just try to be that for Lan Wangji. As long as he kept his thoughts to himself, it should be fine.

He would just have to stay out of Lan Wangji's way for a little while, long enough for his stupid bodily reactions to Lan Wangji to settle back down. Lan Wangji was a trained cultivator, and there was no way he wouldn't notice Wei Wuxian's entire body tensing and heart racing every time the man was near.

Wei Wuxian would just have to learn how to make himself act like he always had. Of course, that was when his brain decided to shove the memory of Lan Wangji combing Wei Wuxian's hair, the exact feeling of Lan Wangji's fingers in his hair at the inn where they had stopped for the night on their way to the Burial Mounds.

How elegant Lan Wangji had looked, freshly bathed, hair smooth but still damp, wearing just his sleeping robes as he helped Wei Wuxian prepare for bed.

Wei Wuxian had been so sure that Lan Wangji would be repulsed by what Wei Wuxian had become after being thrown in the Burial Mounds. Constantly waiting for the man to cast him off and join his sect in denouncing him as a heretic. But it hadn't happened.

Instead, Lan Wangji had walked by his side as Wei Wuxian had returned to the Burial Mounds to raise an army unlike anything the world had ever seen.

The realization hit him full in the chest. He gave a hollow laugh, wondering how he hadn't realized it sooner. In retrospect, his fixation on Lan Wangji was obviously not just simple admiration for a fellow cultivator. He remembered how captivated he had been when he'd woken up to see Lan Wangji meditating while he kept watch over Wei Wuxian as he slept in the cave of the Yao.

The fire had gone out, but a soft light filtered in from the entrance of the cave, setting Lan Wangji in silhouette. He had been sitting with perfect posture, his body still and unmoving. It was no wonder they called him one of the perfect Jades. Wei Wuxian wished he could carve the man's likeness into a flawless piece of jade, so that everyone would be able to see his perfection. He had committed the scene to memory, his artist's eye recording the elegant bones beneath the smooth skin of Lan Wangji's hands, and the way the layers of white silk caught the faint light and flowed over broad, contoured shoulders.

Wei Ying didn't even feel bad about how shabby and unrefined he knew he, himself, looked in comparison. It wasn't about that. He remembered thinking that it was just natural to appreciate Lan Wangji's ethereal beauty. Like the way people stood in awe of a cascading waterfall, or a majestic sunrise.

Jiang Yanli had broken that illusion, and now Wei Wuxian was faced with the truth that he might be a little bit in love with the Second Jade of Lan, and he had no idea what to do about it.

He couldn't really even blame himself, though. Aside from Lan Wangji's amazing talent in cultivation as well as his legendary good looks, there was the fact that Lan Zhan had stood for Wei Ying when almost no one else had. Was it any wonder that Wei Wuxian was feeling… *feelings* for him?

Wei Wuxian groaned softly and pressed his hands to his face as the memories of Lan Wangji standing up to Jiang Cheng and even Madam Yu crashed through him.

"Do you have any idea how much trouble you're in?!" Jiang Cheng had shouted as they stood near the site of the Xiangliu battle. Before Wei Wuxian could respond, Jiang Cheng's hand had slammed into Wei Wuxian's shoulder. Normally, the blow wouldn't have done anything, but with Wei Wuxian's core so close to drained, he had stumbled back and would have fallen had not Lan Wangji grabbed his arm.

"Jiang Wanyin," Lan Wangji's voice had cracked like a whip, as he moved between Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian.Lan Zhan had moved between them again, his hand moving to rest on Bichen's sheath sending a clear message to Jiang Cheng.

"You will not strike Wei Ying," Lan Wangji had stated flatly.

Wei Wuxian had known that Jiang Cheng would never really hurt him, but the vehemence of Lan Wangji's defense of him had left Wei Wuxian reeling. Wei Wuxian had grown up knowing deep in his bones that Jiang Cheng mattered more than Wei Wuxian. He didn't feel bad about it, it was just a simple fact. Jiang Cheng was the heir to the Jiang Sect, and Wei Wuxian would have died on the streets long ago if it hadn't been for the Jiang. His life was just not as important as Jiang Cheng's, and that was fine. It made sense. But Lan Wangji didn't treat him that way. Wei Wuxian hadn't known how to handle it then, and he still didn't know how to handle it now.

And then, as if that wasn't bad enough, Lan Wangji had defended him against Madam Yu when he'd gone to warn the Jiang sect about the Wen attack.

Wei Wuxian had knelt at her feet, his back bared for punishment. By the way Madam Yu's feet had shifted slightly in front of him, he could tell she'd raised her arm for the first strike. He had heard Zidian crackle and had closed his eyes and braced for the hit, but would do nothing to evade it. He'd come to Lotus Pier with the full knowledge of what the penalty for violating the terms of the banishment was, and had been prepared to pay that price. He had heard Zidian sing, then the sound of it striking something.

Except... it hadn't struck him .

He opened his eyes in confusion only to find Bichen held in front of him, Zidian wrapped around it's blade. Madam Yu had been nearly incandescent with anger as she stared at the flowing white robes and pristine yet unyielding form of Lan Wangji.

Lan Wangji had put his own reputation on the line to save Wei Wuxian. He had stared down Madam Yu, then turned and walked away with Wei Wuxian.

"I am here, Wei Ying," Lan Zhan had said quietly as he walked beside him, golden eyes and pale skin glowing in the moonlight that shone down upon them.

It really was no wonder that Wei Wuxian had fallen in love with Lan Wangji. Who wouldn't, given everything the man had done for him, everything that Lan Wangji was? Wei Wuxian was only one man, and he had never stood a chance. It was honestly a little ridiculous that it had taken him so long to figure it out.

The problem was that anything between them was utterly impossible. He would join the countless ranks of people who pined after Lan Wangji. He would do his best to not make it awkward, to not let Lan Wangji know what his real feelings were. Lan Wangji did not have many friends. Possibly not *any* friends outside of his own brother and Wei Wuxian. So Wei Ying would not fuck that up by trying to take even more from the Second Jade. He would find a way to keep his feelings hidden.

Though, it might end up being a non-issue. With the current political situation, even friendship would be hard to manage. The Lan elders *hated* Wei Wuxian, and would do anything in their power to prevent a heretic cultivator from sullying their precious Second Jade's reputation.

He knew that Lan Wangji was working at trying to change their mind about him, but it was unlikely. Lan Qiren had disliked him when Wei Wuxian was only asking impertinent questions. He had relented slightly after the battle of the Slaughter Tortoise, but there would be no going back from actually raising an army of undead.

Lan Wangji had spent his entire life being a model of filial piety. Wei Wuxian had long known that he did not want to be the thing responsible for making him choose between his friend and his sect.

But the larger problem was that it would be impossible for Wei Wuxian to go back to his previous ignorance about his own feelings for Lan Zhan. Just the thought of sharing a bed on a night hunt left him breathless, and his body tensing in a way that was definitely *not* platonic.

He let out a jittery huff of a laugh as he remembered the feel of Lan Wangji sharing body heat with him after he'd been struck by the arrow and lost too much blood to keep himself warm.

After Wei Wuxian had been shot, his body unable to stay warm due to blood loss, Wen Qing had asked Lan Wangji to warm him by sharing body heat.

Wei Wuxian had been cold, his entire body aching and drained, leaving him feeling physically vulnerable in a way he was not used to. The solid, warm presence of Lan Wangji's body next to his was something he had not been strong enough to turn down. Another shiver had rippled through him, and Lan Wangji had shifted closer, their bodies finally touching.

"Lan Zhan. How are you so warm?" Wei Wuxian had asked, wishing at the time that he could pull Lan Wangji on top of him like a blanket.

Wei Wuxian bit his lip at the memory, his overactive mind now more than happy to provide images of just exactly how it might feel to have Lan Wangji's body on top of his own. He could easily imagine the feel of that heat and strength bearing down on him, Lan Zhan's large hands easily wrapping around Wei Wuxian's wrists and pinning him down, and -

"Fuck!" Wei Wuxian bit out, twisting in the rumpled sheets and realizing that he was more than half hard. His body was sheened with sweat and he felt a quivering energy racing through his veins that drove a shivering sort of tense excitement through every cell in his body.

There was absolutely no doubt that what Wei Wuxian was currently feeling was not admiration or friendship. It was lust.

Guilt crashed over him like a bucket of ice water.

Lan Wangji had never indicated any sort of interest like that in Wei Wuxian, nor in anyone else. Lan Wangji had stood up for Wei Wuxian because his moral code told him to defend the weak, stand against injustice, and not fear the strong. The fact that Wei Wuxian was so starved for someone to actually give a fuck about him that he'd gone and fallen in love with the man for it was not Lan Wangji's fault.

Lan Wangji had always seemed completely impervious to anyone's attempts to woo him or attract his attention. It had been part of what had captured Wei Wuxian's interest, early on. He was a challenge to someone like Wei Wuxian who liked to make friends everywhere he went. Of course, Lan Zhan had quickly become much more than a simple challenge for Wei Ying, but the fact remained that Lan Wangji just didn't seem to be interested in flirting or courting, much less actual… physical… things.

Wei Wuxian just needed to reign his wayward thoughts in. Lan Wangji was not someone who would appreciate people having lustful feelings about him. He had made that more than clear on numerous occasions. Wei Wuxian remembered the man's response when he had told him that he should tell his stories more.

"Ah, Lan Zhan! You need to tell your exploits better. The handsome Second Jade of Lan, battling a ferocious Tiger Yaogui in the moonlight over a secret river gorge. All the pretty maidens would swoon!"

Lan Wangji had shot him a cold, angry glare that had made Wei Wuxian laugh at how familiar the sight was.

"Lan Zhan is so proper. Even the hint of romance outside of a formal betrothal has you so angry! There's nothing wrong with flirting with a pretty girl, you know. Especially someone who is expected to carry on the family name, like you and your brother are supposed to. Weren't you supposed to be looking for a cultivation partner before the war started?"

"Promiscuity is forbidden. Excessive self-praise is forbidden." Lan Wangji had bit out. His tone had been almost back to the way it was when they'd first met, back when Lan Wangji hadn't been able to tolerate Wei Wuxian's presence, much less been his friend.

Wei Wuxian had chuckled again, a wave of fondness washing over him. Lan Wangji was so pure, even the hint of impropriety had him glaring.

"Ok, ok. I won't tease. Lan Zhan is too good," Wei Wuxian had said in his most conciliatory tone.

Wei Wuxian tried to drill that message into his thick skull. Lan Wangji was too good for these sort of lustful thoughts. Too good to have someone misinterpreting his friendship as something more.

Lan Wangji was too good for Wei Wuxian.

Wei Wuxian would just have to control his thoughts. He just wasn't sure how easy it was going to be to shove his feelings back down into the box that Jiang Yanli had opened.

After many hours Wei Wuxian drifted into a restless sleep. He woke in the morning, fully hard, and with shadowy images of Lan Wangji's body holding him down, moving against him. It was not the first time that Wei Wuxian had woken up hard, and normally, he would have had no trouble taking care of it perfunctorily, as he did other bodily functions. But that morning, he gritted his teeth and refused to touch himself while images of Lan Wangji still played in his mind. He would not disrespect his friend that way.

He dressed and readied himself for the morning, taking A-Yuan down to breakfast. He needed to find something physical to do to take his mind off everything and release some of the jittery energy that was still running riot through his system, so he could be in control by the time Lan Wangji returned.

To be continued…

A/N - So… My chapter count is notoriously bad. We shall see as we get closer to the end what it actually ends up being! This is about a third of the content that I had planned to put in this chapter in my outline, so… yeah. And yes, wwx will see lwj in the next chapter. ;)

Chapter 36: Words slip out

A/N - Happy Birthday wwx!!! Here is a double-length chapter in his honor. If you don't like reading about anything explicit relating to sex, physical attraction, or arousal, the rest of this fic will probably start getting uncomfortable for you. In this chapter, you should skip the section that begins "That night, his dreams were much less innocent". Thank you to ZazGeek for beta'ing!

Wei Wuxian placed more congee in Wen Yuan's bowl, noticing with relief that some of the weight the child had lost was starting to return. The boy was still anxious if Wei Wuxian was out of his sight for very long, but he seemed to be thriving despite all the upheaval to his life the war had brought. Wei Wuxian hoped that the sects would find a balance with both Wen Ruohan and Jin Guangshan out of the picture, so that A-Yuan's generation could grow up without the constant threat of war. Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji's generation were raised as weapons, but A-Yuan didn't need to be. Wouldn't be, if Wei Wuxian had anything to say about it.

But as a sectless cultivator currently on the outs with 3 of the major sects, he knew his role was more to stay out of the way and not raise already high tensions between the sects.

But staying still and doing nothing had never been something Wei Wuxian could do. His recent realization about his feelings for Lan Wangji made it even worse. He needed to be doing *something* , and start establishing what 'normal' would look like for him and A-Yuan now that the war was over. But first, Wei Wuxian needed to assess how recovered his injuries were.

He wondered if Wen Qing was already ensconced in with her patients and research. It would certainly make his plan to test his strength on the sparring field if he didn't have to worry about getting permission from his overly protective doctor. Wen Yuan had spent enough time in Cloud Recesses to have been thoroughly corrupted into not speaking during meals, so Wei Wuxian took the opportunity to scan the other occupants in the dining hall to see if there was any sign of Wen Qing.

Unlike the dining area of Cloud Recesses, the hall in the Unclean Realm was full of voices. The end of the war and the fall of the Wen sect and scandal of the Jin left no shortage of gossip to be discussed, which was definitely *not* forbidden in the Unclean Realm.

" *... heard that Jin Guangshan tried to bribe Sect Leader Nie for…"*

"... the Yao clan has only two members left. I wonder if they will be able to rebuild…"

".. more than half the smaller sects were wiped out before the larger sects got involved. Now there are no cultivators to protect the civilians in those territories…"

"GusuLan and YunmengJiang need marriage alliances the most. They were the hardest hit…"

"... Jiang Yanli and the new Sect Leader Jin…"

"... what about the Twin Jades? Neither of them are married…"

“,,, Hanguang-Jun could marry out or have his bride marry in…”

“... Hanguang-Jun has been working closely with the Jin, and the Lan need funds for rebuilding. Do you think…”

Wei Wuxian shoved the last steam bun in his mouth, turning to see Wen Yuan finishing his bowl of congee. He didn’t want to think about political alliances and especially not the marriages required to secure them. Still, it was a good reminder of Wei Wuxian’s place in things. His body might be compatible with Lan Wangji as a cultivation partner, and Wei Wuxian could no longer deny. But it wouldn’t change the fact that Lan Wangji was the heir to the Lan sect, and his marriage - if it happened - would need to be about helping his sect rebuild.

Wei Wuxian was not a candidate that would make even the longest, most desperate list of potential political partners for the Second Jade of Lan. He had stood maybe a *tiny* chance when it was purely about a cultivation partner, due to Wei Wuxian’s core, but in terms of political alliances, Wei Wuxian had absolutely nothing to offer. Wei Wuxian was not foolish enough to have any misconceptions on that point.

He stood, taking hold of Wen Yuan’s hand as he swallowed the last of his food. The sooner Wei Wuxian could get back to his life as a rogue cultivator, far from the reaches of sect politics and intrigue, the better he would be. It was time to see if all of this miraculous healing that had outed Wei Wuxian’s ridiculous attachment to Lan Wangji was really as good as Wen Qing had made it out to be.

“A-Yuan. Let’s go out to the training courtyard, ok?”

As expected, A-Yuan’s face lit up with excitement at the prospect of another day outside, battling imaginary foes. Wei Wuxian led them out to one of the practice courtyards that was not currently in use, and began slowly moving through the Jiang sword forms. He started off slow, with the basic forms, and slowly increased the speed and complexity as he tested his body’s range of movement. A-Yuan moved around him, doing a combination of mimicking particular moves and occasionally racing off to fight an imaginary enemy.

He vaguely noticed the increasing number of people gathering at the edges of the courtyard to watch him, but he paid it no mind. Back when he was First Disciple at Lotus Pier, the other disciples would often gather to watch him practice. It never bothered him.

Wei Wuxian had never been one for traditional meditation, but he had always found himself able to achieve a clear, fully focused mind when he went through the forms. He was finally able to push his distracting thoughts about Lan Wangji out of his mind as he focused on his own body, breath, and movement. His muscles felt fluid and strong, though they still pulled a bit around the still-healing wound on his chest. Not quite back at full strength, but definitely not like he’d had a fucking arrow in his chest less than two weeks ago.

The onlookers were not silent, and Wei Wuxian heard murmurs about how miraculous his healing was. The tone was a mixture of awe and fear. Some wondered if the rumors of Wei Wuxian no longer being fully human were true. The link between him and Lan Wangji was not something that was public knowledge (Wei Wuxian was sure that Lan Wangji would be embarrassed if that information spread, and was glad he’d heard nothing about it outside of the

four of them who were there when it was discovered), so his recovery from what had been a near fatal wound would likely only further the rumors that he was… changed.

His lips curved into a dark, bitter smile. Wei Wuxian was fine with that. Let them think that he was indestructible. Maybe it would make some of the power-hungry cultivators who had tried attacking his sister in their attempt to get the seal think twice.

“Wei Wuxian!”

Nie Mingjue’s voice boomed out across the courtyard. Wei Wuxian finished the arc of movement, then stopped, turning to face the towering man who was approaching.

“Red Blade Master,” Wei Wuxian greeted.

“It’s good to see you out of the sick room. Though much sooner than expected.”

There was a question in the statement, but Wei Wuxian did not want anyone other than the people who already knew to find out about his one-sided bond with Lan Wangji. He would protect Lan Zhan’s reputation… it was the least he owed the man.

“Wen Daifu is a remarkable healer,” Wei Wuxian said, instead.

Nie Mingjue narrowed his eyes at the response, clearly aware that it was not the full story. He did not push, at least not at that moment, and Wei Wuxian was grateful. He liked Nie Mingjue, and the sect leader had opened his sect to protect Jiang Yanli. If he pushed, Wei Wuxian would probably answer if asked directly. Instead, Nie Mingjue gave a short nod.

“We should spar when you are up to full strength again,” the Nie Sect Leader said.

Wei Wuxian smiled. “It would be my honor to give what challenge I could. I’m afraid in my current condition, it would not be very interesting for you.”

“Mm,” Nie Mingjue said, not disagreeing.

When it came to physical fighting, almost no one could give Red Blade Master much of a challenge, but Wei Wuxian would be lying if he said he wouldn’t love to try when he was full strength again.

“In the meantime, I was hoping I could make myself useful to the Nie sect. With so many of the minor sects wiped out, I have heard there are many villages without help.”

Nie Mingjue frowned, nodding in agreement. He glanced over to where Wen Yuan was still playing with his wooden practice sword.

“We have more requests than we have cultivators to send. But are you wanting to leave so soon?”

Wei Wuxian let his gaze also move to Wen Yuan. The boy was loath to let Wei Wuxian out of his sight. It would be hard on him if Wei Wuxian was gone for any serious amount of time.

“With some of the battles having been fought relatively close to the Unclean Realm, I would imagine there are areas nearby that have requested aid dealing with restless spirits,” Wei Wuxian

said.

Nie Mingjue agreed. “You are fast on your sword, as I recall. I have at least a dozen requests that are within two hours of here by sword. Most of them are low level night hunts. Not exciting for a cultivator of your level, but since you’re recovering, it might suit you. You could leave in the evening, and be back by morning for most of them. He could stay with us and train with the younger disciples while you’re here.”

Wei Wuxian nodded. It would be a good exchange. He could help the Nie Sect and the surrounding communities, and the Nie Sect would serve as a home base for A-Yuan.

Wei Wuxian lifted his arms in front of him, joining his hands and offering a formal bow.

“This one thanks you for your protection of A-Yuan.”

Nie Mingjue returned the gesture. “No thanks are necessary. You protected the Nie. We will protect you and yours.”

When Nie Mingjue left, A-Yuan came over.

“Xian-gege is leaving?” the child asked, his voice quavering slightly.

Wei Wuxian cursed himself, internally. He had really forgotten what it was like to be a child, pretending not to hear the adults talking around you, but taking in every word that was said. He should have talked to Nie Mingjue privately. He crouched down in front of the child.

“I will be gone for a few hours at night. There are people who need help, who aren’t in as safe a place as you and I are right now. But I’ll be back by the time you wake up.”

Wen Yuan looked at him steadily. Wei Wuxian wondered if the child’s parents had told him the same thing, only to never return.

“Promise?”

Wei Wuxian barely managed not to flinch. He did not want to lie, but he also did not want Wen Yuan to be afraid. He knew that his sister would be there for A-Yuan, if ever there came a time that Wei Wuxian did not return, but he would give whatever reassurances he could.

“The night hunts I am going on are very simple ones. I did them when I was a child. If there is anything more dangerous, I will come back and get help. I can promise you that.”

If Jiang Cheng had been here, he would have scoffed at the idea that Wei Wuxian would ever ask for help when he never had before. But Wei Wuxian knew what it was like to lose his parents to a night hunt gone wrong. He would not take foolish risks while he was recovering from his injuries.

A-Yuan nodded after a moment, evidently deciding that the promise was sufficient. Wei Wuxian grinned, and ruffled the boy’s hair.

“Excellent! Then let’s continue our training so we have time to wash up before lunch.”

“A-Yuan will train with Xian-gege! Then I can come with you on your night hunts!”

Wei Wuxian nearly staggered under the surge of emotion that swamped him at the simple words. A-Yuan was obviously far too young at the moment to go with him. But he would grow. Could they really stay together? Could he really have a future with this child, teaching him what he knew, night-hunting together?

Wei Wuxian had never really thought about what it would be like to have a child before. But he fiercely wanted the future that flickered tentatively in his mind with A-Yuan. He tamped down the thought of Lan Wangji being there with them, knowing it was impossible. But he could have A-Yuan.

“Alright,” Wei Wuxian managed to push the words out past the lump in his throat. “But if you want to night hunt with me, you will have to work very hard!”

“Mm!” A-Yuan said, nodding happily.

They spent the rest of the morning together. Wei Wuxian showed him the simple breath technique that his mother had shown him for focusing the mind and circulating the spiritual energy, when he had been old enough to start working towards forming a golden core at a very young age. It was one of the only teachings he had from her. It was not the same method that was used by the Jiang or the Lan. Wei Wuxian did not know if it was from Baoshan Sanren, or his mother’s family, but it was his own.

And now it was A-Yuan’s.

The evening was hard. A-Yuan was fussy about going to sleep, worried about whether Wei Wuxian would be back in the morning or not. Wei Wuxian knew it would take time for the child to be able to trust that things would be ok. He remembered his first several months in Lotus Pier, waiting for the moment when he would be thrown out, or that somehow, Uncle Fengmian would disappear and he would be left to fend for himself against the dogs and Madam Yu. Worrying about what would happen to the younger Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli, since they had no experience with things like how to scavenge for food or find shelter in the rainy season.

While the fear had never fully gone away, it had lessened over the first year with the Jiangs enough that it no longer consumed all of Wei Wuxian’s waking thoughts. He hoped it would be the same for A-Yuan. He knew that the best way to show A-Yuan that he was safe was to set up a routine and be consistent. He would make sure that - for the next month at least - he was never gone for more than half a day, and A-Yuan would always know when he was leaving and when he was returning. It would take time to build the trust, given all the boy had been through, but Wei Wuxian had faith that A-Yuan would find his footing again.

Nie Huaisang had given A-Yuan a set of dark robes that matched Wei Wuxian’s for him to wear while training with the Nie children.

“Unless he wants to officially join the Nie Sect, he should have his own clothes,” the Nie sect heir had said.

Wei Wuxian had frowned. “What about the ones he’s wearing?”

Lan Wangji had seemed strangely adamant that Wen Yuan keep the Lan robes that he had arrived in. Wei Wuxian didn’t really mind. After all, the Lan sect had kept him safe during the war. And

if seeing Wen Yuan wearing Lan Wangji's sect colors allowed Wei Wuxian to indulge in a tiny fantasy of them being a family together, well… no one had to know.

But Nie Huaisang's fan had fluttered in the way that Wei Wuxian had learned meant that the man had thought of something that was important, and was trying to make it seem like it was something silly.

"I don't know, Wei-xiong. I really don't know, but it just seems like he doesn't really match with your color scheme?"

Wei Wuxian had paused, his mind trying to find the hidden meaning behind his friend's words.

"I mean… the Lan Sect doesn't have jurisdiction over you. Thank goodness, right? With all those rules and edicts."

Edicts like the one where they have condemned you and would have punished you if they had any authority over you at all, Nei Huaisang hadn't said the words, but they were clear.

If A-Yuan wore Lan robes, it implied that they would have ownership over him. And if they were still dead set on punishing Wei Wuxian for his heretical acts, then…

Wei Wuxian had bowed.

"This one thanks you for your thoughtfulness, and gratefully accepts the robes."

It was yet another reminder that - whatever his feelings might be for Lan Zhan - they were never going to go anywhere.

The moon was nearly full as Wei Wuxian left the Unclean Realm to go help a nearby village that had been plagued by a spirit of some sort. It felt strange to be fully alone in the night air as he flew silently on his sword, the silvery light from the moon washing down over the land.

He caught himself looking over his shoulder for pristine white robes that would be glowing softly in the moonlight, and felt annoyance flare at himself at the disappointment that flickered through him when the sky remained empty behind him.

Of *course* Lan Wangji would have better things to do than accompany Wei Wuxian on a night hunt that any fourteen-year-old cultivator could handle on their own. Wei Wuxian was just being stupid.

He had been spoiled by the amount of time he had been spending in the man's company recently. Between the *Xiangliu* and the war, it had made sense for them to be together, but that was no longer true. They had different paths to walk in this life, and Wei Wuxian needed to remember his own.

The spirit was quickly dealt with, the grateful villagers providing Wei Wuxian with food and drink before he returned to the Unclean Realm. It had been a while since he had been able to enjoy alcohol, between the war and Wen Qing's strict monitoring after his injury.

The familiar burn of the baijiu in his throat as he drank his first cup was bliss. He had discovered at the age of 14 how well it could take the edge off his thoughts, dulling his hyperactive mind

enough to let him catch his breath.

He had missed it.

He was careful not to drink so much that it would affect his ability to get back to the Unclean Realm before A-Yuan woke, ordering only one more jar before heading out. Knowing that A-Yuan was waiting for him, would be devastated if he didn't return, anchored Wei Wuxian in a way he had never been before. Other than Jiang Yanli, Wei Wuxian often felt as though the rest of the Jiang family would have been quietly relieved if he had gone on a night hunt and never returned when he was younger. His *shijie* would have grieved for him, but she had a full life ahead of her, and did not need him there for it. A-Yuan was different. A-Yuan needed him.

He wondered if this was what family felt like.

He arrived back to his bed in the room that adjoined A-Yuan's still hours before dawn, his mind just fuzzy enough that he allowed images of Lan Wangji to fill his thoughts without the deluge of guilt that always accompanied them. Silly daydreams of raising A-Yuan together with Lan Wangji, night hunting together. Living in a small home, away from all the sects, just the three of them.

It was foolish, but he could blame it on the alcohol as he drifted off to sleep.

Wei Wuxian was lulled into a sense of normalcy over the next three weeks, following the same pattern of short, simple night-hunts, time with A-Yuan, and forcing himself not to think of Lan Wangji.

The latter was difficult, because every inn he stopped at had rumors of the political machinations as the sects scrambled to fill the power vacuum left by Wen Ruohan and Jin Guangshan, and almost always the talk would circle around to the various arranged marriages between sects both large and small that were being announced. In his simple black robes, he did not draw attention to himself, and was able to hear the relatively uncensored version of the tales that were being told.

Speculation on the marital status of the Second Jade of GusuLan inevitably was brought up. At first, it was general, the way it had been for any notable cultivator, but of late, it had become more specific, centering around the number of times that Lan Wangji had been seen in the presence of Luo Qinyang.

The thought of Lan Zhan wed to one of the many cultivators who would surely be clamoring to be his cultivation partner caused his stomach to twist. But Wei Wuxian had always liked MianMian. She was not as strong as Lan Wangji, but she was honorable and not afraid to stand up for what was right. Before the war, there had been a lot of pressure for Lan Wangji to find a cultivation partner that could help him cultivate to immortality and bring prestige to the Lan sect, given that no one had managed that feat in centuries. The need for sects to forge tight alliances after the war had changed things. Political ties were now the most important, at least based on the rumor mill in the villages Wei Wuxian passed through.

MianMian was not a strong enough cultivator to enable Lan Wangji to reach immortality, but she would provide a solid political alliance, and was someone that Wei Wuxian thought matched Lan Wangji at least in her morals and sense of justice.

Wei Wuxian wondered if Lan Wangji would be relieved to have a more traditional arranged marriage, rather than being pressured to try to reach immortality. Dual cultivation required very frequent ‘acts of intimacy’. Daily was ideal. Given how strongly Lan Wangji had reacted to someone even brushing against the sleeve of his pristine robes, Wei Wuxian couldn’t imagine the man being able to tolerate something like that.

An arranged marriage of the ordinary type had very different expectations. Wei Wuxian had seen that between Madam Yu and Jiang Fengmian. It required almost no physical acts of intimacy at all, outside of the initial consummation of the marriage, and possibly a few more acts if heirs were required. They did not need to share chambers, or really interact much at all.

That would surely be preferable to Lan Wangji, who had always been quite clear about his aversion to physical touch of any sort. He wondered if MianMian would be ok with that sort of marriage. Probably. It was far better than most arranged marriages.

They would be beautiful together, Wei Wuxian told himself firmly. They would be compatible.

He forced himself not to think about what it would be like to dual cultivate with Lan Wangji. He drank more than usual that night, stumbling into bed.

That night, Wei Wuxian’s dreams were much less innocent than in previous nights, and he woke with sweat-dampened sheets and his fingertips tingling with remembered images of what it felt like when his hands sliding under Lan Zhan’s robes and pushing them aside. The rest of his body was shivering with the hazy memories of strong shoulders and arms, bared to his heated gaze, that gripped Wei Ying hard and pressed him down into the mattress. He tried to shake away the shadowy, false memories of their bodies pressed together, Lan Zhan’s weight bearing down on him, keeping him anchored. The smooth, defined muscles that Wei Wuxian had seen long ago in the Cold Springs were dredged up from his mind and inserted into his heated imaginings, along with the scent of sandalwood that always surrounded Lan Wangji. The intense, golden eyes that so often stared at him, focused and *seeing* him in a way that only Lan Zhan has ever bothered to do...

Wei Wuxian drew a shuddering breath, trying to tamp down on the residual arousal from the dream still surging through his body. Luckily, A-Yuan had gotten used to Wei Wuxian sleeping late in the mornings and, other than a quick peek at him to ensure that Wei Wuxian had made it back safely during the night, A-Yuan left him to sleep in as long as he wanted.

Wei Wuxian looked down between his thighs at the evidence of the nature of his dream lewdly tenting the sheet. He was shaking and achingly hard. He wanted… he wanted things he had no business wanting. But when had he ever been wise?

He forced himself to regulate his breathing, hoping his erection would go away on its own. But the rise and fall of his chest shifted the sheets, causing them to drag fractionally over his already sensitized cock. The precum that was leaking from its head caused the fabric to cling damply in a way that only increased the sensitive friction.

“ *Fuck,* ” Wei Wuxian breathed out quietly, clenching his jaw as his hips flexed up reflexively.

His eyes fluttered closed. During the day, he was able to control his thoughts, most of the time. At night, he was at their mercy, and the more he tried to shove the imagery from the dream away, the more it played out over and over in his mind's eye.

Wei Wuxian knew it would be only a matter of time before Wen Yuan came looking for him. He couldn't lay in bed all day trying to will away his erection. He shoved the sheets down, hoping to avoid leaving any evidence of his hopeless lust behind, and forced his mind to blank. He refused to keep thoughts of Lan Wangji in his head while he roughly gripped his dick, stroking it in harsh, punishing strokes until he came, shuddering, on his stomach.

He lay on the bed staring up at the ceiling, hoping it would be a few more weeks before he saw Lan Wangji again. He had no idea how he would face him, how he would act with him when shameful desires and images kept flooding his mind at the mere thought of the man.

Wen Yuan was in lessons with the younger Nie disciples when Wei Wuxian finished bathing and went to find him. He didn't want to interrupt the class, so he just watched from a distance, feeling a sense of peace as he saw the child he was beginning to think of as his own following along with the lessons and occasionally laughing with some of the other children.

Wen Yuan was safe. Wei Wuxian may have failed at many things in his life, but there was no doubt that Wen Yuan was safe because of his actions.

His and Lan Wangji's.

The thought made him wish for foolish things, for them to be keeping Wen Yuan safe together, training him together, watching him grow together.

He pushed those thoughts away even more harshly than he did the lustful ones, because they were even more dangerously seductive to someone like Wei Wuxian, who had always craved a family of his own.

There was the usual traffic of other people moving around the Unclean Realm. He generally paid them no mind, but his attention was caught when a group of cultivators passed, mentioning that emissaries from several of the other sects would be arriving shortly to discuss various things with Nie Mingjue. Hanguang-Jun and Mianmian were amongst those expected to arrive.

Wei Wuxian was not ready to face Lan Wangji yet, especially not when he would be accompanied by Luo Qingyang. Levering himself away from the stone pillar he'd been leaning against, Wei Wuxian headed towards the city gates. He hadn't caught up with Meng Yao or Nie Mingjue yet to pick up a new night hunt, since he didn't usually go two nights in a row, but Wei Wuxian could spend the rest of the morning outside the city. Wen Yuan's lessons didn't end until early afternoon, and - by then - Lan Wangji and the other cultivators would surely be ensconced in Nie Mingjue's meeting room.

Wei Wuxian walked along the road that led to the north for a few minutes, which was in the opposite direction from where the guests would be arriving from. There was a narrow trail that he'd seen while flying over the area. It led to a small meadow, far enough away out of sight from the gates and near no major trail. It had become the place he went to when he wanted to be

alone with his thoughts. There was shade and a small stream nearby and some good rocks for lounging on. He could safely spend the rest of the morning there, with no risk of accidentally running into Lan Wangji.

The morning was quickly growing unseasonably warm under the strong late-spring sun. Wei Wuxian had grown up in the heat of Yunmeng, where training was often interspersed with swimming, and the rigid rules of modesty that governed the sects like the Nie and Lan where the climate was cooler and wearing six layers at all times was not a death sentence. Feeling secure in the isolation of the spot he had chosen to train, Wei Wuxian stripped off his outer robes, laying them across a large, flat rock that was on the edge of a small stream. His thin, red inner robe would dry quickly if Wei Wuxian needed to take a rinse in the stream before returning to town.

Wei Wuxian drew *Suibian* , starting up with a basic warm-up. He wanted to take on a haunting he had heard about nearby with a somewhat stronger spirit than he had tried recently. Before he did, he wanted to really put his body to the test to see how close to full strength he was. He also needed something to do with all of the jittery energy at the knowledge that Lan Wangji was likely already in the Unclean Realm. It had been weeks since he'd seen the man, and the last time he had…

Wei Wuxian felt heat flood through him, equal parts embarrassment and arousal. He shoved them both down and moved his blade faster, pushing harder. He imagined the *Xiangliu,* how he had struck its scales with all his strength and had his blows simply glance off. He fought it again, in his mind, striking blows against the remembered fissures his lightning attack had left. Wei Wuxian had not been able to finish the creature off, but thankfully, Lan Wangji *had* .

He imagined what it must have been like, Lan Wangji battling the creature with deadly intensity. He would have had to have examined the remains of Wei Wuxian's attacks, and - as always - had been able to understand Wei Wuxian's intent in battle and followed through without needing any explanation. The graceful strength of precision of Lan Wangji's attacks with Bichen must have been legendary. Wei Wuxian wished he had been conscious enough to have witnessed it first hand.

Wei Wuxian continued to leap and spin, striking out with *Suibian* with all his physical and spiritual power. His robe clung to his skin, catching a bit on the raw scar on his chest where the arrow had pierced him. Wei Wuxian pulled his arms out of the sleeves, folding the robe down at the waist so he could continue without the risk of aggravating the scar tissue, which he was sure Wen Qing would check later. The sun was warm on his sweat-sheened shoulders and back, and he reveled in the fluid flex and pull of his muscles working at their limit. His strength was almost fully back. Now it was just a matter of testing his stamina.

The soft sound of a leaf being crushed beneath someone's foot caught his attention, and Wei Wuxian spun, blade poised to strike.

It was not an assassin that was standing at the edge of the small clearing.

"Lan Zhan!" Wei Wuxian's voice sounded odd to his own ears as a wave of nine different emotions hit him at once at the sight of his friend after so many weeks apart, leaving him feeling stunned and overwhelmed. "What are you doing here?"

His voice came out constricted, and he could only hope that Lan Wangji ascribed it to surprise, rather than whatever it was that surged fierce and hot through Wei Wuxian's chest at the sight of the man he hadn't seen in almost a month. Lan Wangji was rigid and utterly still as he stood looking at Wei Wuxian. The wind had chosen that moment to pick up, causing Lan Wangji's white silk robes to flow around his body, making him even more ethereal and other-worldly than usual.

He was so beautiful, it took Wei Wuxian's breath away to see him in person again after so long with just his imaginings.

Lan Wangji's expression was frozen, his eyes locked on Wei Wuxian with even more than their usual intensity. His eyes drifted to the scar on Wei Wuxian's chest, and lingered there, likely assessing Wei Wuxian's rate of healing.

"Wei Ying. Wear your robes properly," Lan Wangji scolded after a suspended moment.

Wei Wuxian laughed, shaking his head even though he felt his face flush in a way it hadn't in the past. Lan Wangji never changed, and Wei Wuxian loved him for it. The truthfulness of that thought made Wei Wuxian's breath catch in his throat, and he quickly turned towards the small stream to get his face under control before Lan Wangji noticed something was off. He had always been shameless with Lan Wangji, but it had never been with intent. Not that Wei Wuxian was *intending anything* at the moment, but the feel of Lan Wangji's piercing gaze, even if it was a disapproving one, landed differently now than it had a month ago.

Wei Wuxian would rather die than admit it, however, so he threw Lan Wangji a smirk over his shoulder as he sheathed *Suibian.*

"Ah, Lan Zhan! Always so proper." Wei Wuxian turned back and headed towards the stream, hoping his jangling nerves would shut the fuck up before he lost his mind. He knelt down on a dry rock at the edge of the book, and quickly sluiced water over his face and shoulders to rinse the sweat away. The water was freezing, but it did nothing to cool the strange new awareness that was pulsing through Wei Wuxian's body as he felt Lan Wangji's gaze on him.

He didn't have a cloth to dry himself with, he hesitated to pull his red inner robes up over his damp shoulders. He turned to find Lan Wangji standing only a few paces away, still watching Wei Wuxian with no expression.

"Lan Zhan! The stream here isn't quite as cold as the waters of your Cold Spring, but you can join me if you'd like."

"Shameless," Lan Wangji said, turning away sharply.

The familiar response settled some of the odd churning in Wei Wuxian's stomach. Whatever wayward thoughts that Wei Wuxian might be having about Lan Wangji, it was clear that Lan Wangji did not have similar issues. It would be like it always had been, as soon as Wei Wuxian learned to control his own mind: Wei Wuxian would say or do something flirtatious, and Lan Wangji would become annoyed and tell Wei Wuxian off.

Wei Wuxian hadn't ruined it by having... *thoughts* about Lan Wangji.

“Lan Zhan! Always so stuffy. But you know, you’re going to have to learn to deal with this when you marry. Unless you make it really clear how you feel. All those rumors about you agreeing to have a cultivation partner might confuse your spouse.”

Lan Wangji began to look back at Wei Wuxian at his words, then immediately snapped his head back in the other direction. His long, slender fingers gripped the hilt of Bichen so hard that the knuckles turned white.

“ *Dress properly* ,” Lan Wangji said, his voice harsh.

Wei Wuxian chuckled fondly, but pulled his inner robe up and walked over to the rock where his outer robes were set and began pulling them on. Lan Zhan was so pure and proper. Wei Wuxian actually *did* worry quite a bit about whether or not his spouse would put pressure on Lan Wangji regarding ‘marital duties’. Surely no one could be married to such a man and *not* want to be touched intimately by him. Wei Wuxian just hoped that - whoever his sect picked as Lan Wangji’s spouse - they would be respectful and considerate and not push for things Lan Wangji had no interest in.

“You must be relieved now that at least you won’t be forced to seek a cultivation partner. Everyone is saying that the focus is just on political alliances now. Arranged marriages still sound like they’d suck, but at least you are allowed to have your space.”

Lan Wangji turned sharply to look at Wei Wuxian, his gaze heavy with a meaning that Wei Wuxian could not decipher..

“I still seek a cultivation partner.”

Wei WuXian’s brain stuttered. One of the two of them was not understanding the implication of that statement, and he was pretty sure it was Lan Zhan.

“You… *want* a cultivation partner?”

“Mm,” Lan Wangji replied, seemingly quite clear.

“But wait. No. I mean, yeah, you probably want someone to meditate with and like… do night hunts with on the regular because… it’s always good to have someone whose skills you know you can trust.” Images of Lan Wangji night hunting with Mianmian flickered through his head, and he felt his stomach twist unpleasantly. “I get that. But that’s not what having a cultivation partner *means* .”

Wei Wuxian felt somehow like he was having ‘the talk’ with one of the younger disciples back at Lotus Pier when they’d asked him about where babies come from.

Lan Wangji gave him a flat look that seemed to imply he was already well aware of what Wei Wuxian was trying to tell him, but that just didn’t make any sense. Lan Wangji wasn’t even comfortable seeing a male friend’s bare torso, much less actually *touching* someone.

Wei Wuxian suddenly felt a surge of protectiveness. Lan Zhan might be one of the strongest cultivators of their generation, but this was something he clearly was not trained for. The Lans, with all their repression and restraint, might not realize that these sorts of things need to be made

clear in the early stages of the marital contract negotiation, or the parties could end up extremely unhappy with the arrangement.

Why was no one looking out for Lan Zhan?!

Wei Wuxian needed to fix this before Lan Wangji committed to something he would regret. Once Lan Wangji gave his word about something, he would keep it no matter what. The thought of Lan Zhan having sex with someone out of a sense of duty or obligation made Wei Wuxian feel almost queasy.

Wei Wuxian had to make him understand so he could avoid putting himself in that situation.

“You couldn’t even look at the etchings I gave you back in Cloud Recesses! Lan Zhan, you have to be careful what you say to people, or they’ll get the wrong idea and have expectations about the wedding night. Everyone is talking about who will get to marry the great Hanguang-Jun! Poor Lan Qiren must be going blind and deaf from all the proposal offers he has to read and listen to for you. So you will need to be more clear, Lan Zhan. Having a cultivation partner involves sex, Lan Zhan. *Fucking* . You can’t even look at pictures of it!”

Wei Wuxian felt his own face flush and his chest and brain were doing really weird things that he needed someone to help him with immediately.

“Not fucking. Joint spiritual cultivation,” Lan Wangji stated primly.

Wei Wuxian gave himself a lot of credit for not throwing himself into the stream at the sound of Lan Wangji actually saying the word ‘fucking’.

“ *Naked* spiritual cultivation *while fucking* !” Wei Wuxian exclaimed, his arms gesturing wildly.

“I have read the books on the process,” Lan Wangji replied, way too calmly for the conversation they were currently having, in Wei Wuxian’s opinion.

Books. From the Lan library, where all the passion was sucked out of everything. Those books were likely vague and unclear, but Lan Wangji was looking at him steadily while they were taking about sex.

“You don’t even like it when people brush against the edge of your outer robes, Lan Zhan!”

Lan Wangji’s gaze darkened, and he gave Wei Wuxian an unreadable look.

“I will not mind my cultivation partner touching me.”

Wei Wuxian thought he might actually enter qi deviation if this conversation continued. He threw his arm up in the air.

“I give up. Whatever. You want to go do this, then fine. Just… *fine* ! But don’t say I didn’t warn you when you get married to someone who wants to touch you all the time. Because that is what is going to happen if you’re not *clear* , Lan Zhan! Anyone who has the chance to marry you will want to touch you all the time, every day. You just… you have no idea!”

Lan Wangji's eyes had widened at Wei Wuxian's tirade. Wei Wuxian mounted *Suibian* , not even sure why he was so ridiculously angry. All he knew was that if he stayed in the clearing talking about how Lan Wangji was willing to have frequent sex with some random, hypothetical cultivator he was going to lose his mind.

He was already landing in the practice yard of the Unclean Realm when he realized he never actually found out what Lan Wangji had been doing there. He sighed. He would have to find the man before he left. The meetings were scheduled to last well into the evening, so that should not be an issue. But first, Wei Wuxian needed to be able to breathe. And a drink. Wei Wuxian *really* needed a drink.

To be continued...

Chapter 37: Make me listen

A/N - I AM A WHOLE WEEK EARLY!! I am so excited LOL. Thanks to the amazing ZazGeek for beta'ing this chapter. I still have no idea of the accuracy of the total chapter count but it is likely off, and will likely be a couple of chapters longer but the point is that we are close to the end.

Wei Wuxian hopped off his sword mere inches from the guards at the gate to the Unclean Realm, earning an annoyed look from three of them. He gave a hurried smile and an apology, and barely managed to keep from shoving them out of the way to get inside, away from anyone who might want to talk with him.

He was agitated and angry and flustered in a way that he didn't know how to handle, and didn't really understand. He had an irrational need to pull Wen Yuan out of class and flee the Unclean Realm and go live in a cave somewhere where they would never have to see anyone from the cultivation world again. He could live in ignorance of whomever Lan Wangji was going to end up married to and keep Wen Yuan safe from all the shitty sect politics and maneuvering.

He wouldn't be so selfish as to *actually* upend Wen Yuan's life yet again for such a ridiculous reason, but the urge was still there. Since moving to a cave was out and Lan Wangji had found his secret practice field, the only option left seemed to be to lock himself in his room and at least avoid having to speak with anyone (especially Lan Wangji) for the rest of the day. The thought had barely been completed when a familiar voice pierced his half-baked plan.

"A-Xian!"

Wei Wuxian could count on one finger the times he had *not* been happy to hear his sister's voice, and this was it. Still, his *Shijie* did not deserve his rudeness, so he forced himself to stop and turn to face her.

" *Shijie,* " he said, forcing a smile. She was walking towards him, Nie Huaisang by her side. "I am feeling tired. I'm going to go lay down for a bit."

It wasn't a lie, but he felt the twinge of guilt at her worried expression. Nie Huaisang's eyes looked at him measuringly over the top of his fan.

"Wei-xiong. I hope you didn't overdo your training today," Nie Huaisang offered, despite Wei Wuxian not having told anyone where he was going or what he was doing.

Wei Wuxian's eyes narrowed, and he suddenly had a very good idea of how Lan Wangji had found him so easily.

"Big Brother has asked you to join the session for an hour or two. There are matters relating to you that are being discussed."

Jiang Yanli looked over at Wei Wuxian. "Are you well enough to go? Should I call Wen Daifu?"

Wei Wuxian took a slow breath. Of course, Lan Wangji had only come to find Wei Wuxian to let him know that he was needed in a meeting, and Wei Wuxian had launched into discussing Lan Wangji's potential *marriage* , which was none of Wei Wuxian's fucking business, and then run off like a crazy person.

If Nie Mingjue had information that Wei Wuxian needed to know, it was either about the assassination attempt or something relating to the seal. Either way, Wei Wuxian needed to get over himself and go.

He looked up to see Lan Wangji walking through the courtyard, face expressionless and his golden eyes locked on Wei Wuxian.

"Right. It's fine. I'm fine. Let's go."

Wei Wuxian turned and headed to the room where Nie Mingjue held these sorts of sessions. He heard Nie Huaisang and Jiang Yanli turn and greet Lan Wangji, but he kept walking. Lan Wangji did not call out to him and Wei Wuxian pretended he was fine with it.

Still, he could feel the weight of the man's gaze between his shoulder blades until he turned the corner and headed into the meeting room.

The news that Wei Wuxian had been summoned to hear was that Su She had been found and was in custody. He had been trying to create a new sect, setting himself up as the leader, and using bastardized Lan techniques as its basis. GusuLan had banished him for his earlier crimes.

Wei Wuxian tuned out the debate about whether the Lan sect still had jurisdiction to execute him, given that he was no longer technically part of their sect. He looked up to find Lan Wangji's golden eyes locked on him, face unreadable. Wei Wuxian looked away, trying to keep the flood of embarrassment down. Hopefully Lan Wangji would write off all the crazy ranting that Wei Wuxian had done back in the clearing as just another example of Wei Ying being an idiot.

MianMian was speaking now about how the Jin investigation was going. Evidently, she and Lan Wangji had investigated the group that had chased after Wei Wuxian and Jiang Yanli, Lan Wangji through *Inquiry* , and MianMian through physical intimidation of Jin Guangshan's staunchest supporters. The matter appeared to be under control, with no loose ends.

They work well together, Wei Wuxian thought, forcing himself to be happy about it.

In any case, it was safe enough that Jiang Yanli would be going to Koi Tower to visit Jin Zixuan. There were still grumblings from other sects about the powerful artifact in Wei Wuxian's possession, but - for now - most of the cultivation world seemed content to keep a wary eye on him, rather than try to kill him outright.

He was still banned from GusuLan territories, and still somewhat ambiguous about his welcome in Jin or Jiang lands, but the rest of the world was open to him and A-Yuan.

The thought had barely finished in his mind when there was a small scuffle at the door and Wen Yuan came bustling in, making a beeline for Wei Wuxian.

The young boy had learned to at least stay quiet when he interrupted a meeting that Wei Wuxian had been pulled into, so he didn't make a sound as he slid happily onto Wei Wuxian's lap. His little fingers were smudged with ink, indicating that today's lesson must have included some writing practice. At least the new robes Nie Huaisang had given the boy did a better job of hiding ink stains than the impractical white robes he'd worn before.

He looked up to see Lan Wangji staring at them. Unlike before, this time there was definitely a displeased expression on the man's face as he looked at A-Yuan. Wei Wuxian thought that it was because A-Yuan had entered the room without permission, but then Lan Wangji turned and glared at Nie Huaisang.

The Nie Sect heir slunk down in his chair, lifting his fan to act as a barrier between himself and the man glaring daggers at him.

The meeting continued around them, moving on to topics that did not require Wei Wuxian's presence. After a while, A-Yuan's tummy growled, and Wei Wuxian used the excuse to leave the meeting's endless drudgery. He nodded at Nie Mingjue in a request to be excused, which was acknowledged with a somewhat amused nod in return. The man was no fool, and had likely been expecting Wei Wuxain to find an excuse sooner or later like he usually did to avoid these types of discussions. If Wei Wuxian had an extra incentive to leave this time, no one needed to know about it. He took Wen Yuan's hand and headed to the exit. He could feel Lan Wangji's eyes on him the entire time.

The cooks in the main kitchens of the Unclean Realm were used to A-Yuan's late afternoon visits, and smiled indulgently at both him and Wei Wuxian as they handed them a plate of freshly made osthmanthus cakes to share. Whatever the cultivators thought about the Yiling Patriarch, the women who worked in the kitchens of the Nie ancestral home only saw a young father who doted on his son.

A young father who was way too thin and needed to eat more, which they viewed as their personal mission.

Sitting in the kitchens and being fussed over with Wen Yuan was usually one of Wei Wuxian's favorite times, but his nerves were still jangling and he found himself continually looking over his shoulder, looking for a flash of white robes. He kept his smile in place, not wanting to make A-Yuan or any of the kitchen aunties worry, but he needed to get out of the main hall and away from people who might try to rope him back into the meeting room.

One of the younger Nie disciples who was in lessons with Wen Yuan found them on their way back to their rooms and asked Wen Yuan if he wanted to see his rock collection. Wen Yuan most definitely *did* , and the two of them raced off with a promise from A-Yuan to return by dinner, which was still several hours away.

Wei Wuxian took advantage of unexpectedly having time to himself, and headed directly for the nearest tavern. It would be relatively empty at this time of day, and he really needed a drink.

Wei Wuxian idly traced his finger along the rim of the bottle of surprisingly high quality baijiu, the smooth feel of the ceramic familiar and comforting. It was almost as good as the Emperor's Smile from Caiyi Town, and the memory made the burn all the harsher. He was banned from all GusuLan territories, and would not be welcome to go drinking in Caiyi Town any time soon. He closed his hand around it, lifting it to his lips and ignoring the small cup that was sitting on his table. Tonight was not a night to bother with small glasses from which to drink. He tipped his head back, feeling the alcohol flow between his lips and down his throat, not taking the time to really savor the flavor the way he usually would after months away from any sort of decent alcohol.

The tavern hadn't been as empty as he'd hoped, as word of the guest cultivators' arrival had people gathering to gossip and speculate on what news was coming. Topics ranged from concerns about another impending war (fortunately, those were false), new trade deals, and - of course- the ubiquitous speculation of marriages. Most of the conversation revolved around whether either of the Nie brothers would finally wed, but there was also some discussion about the fact that Hanguang-Jun and Luo Quinyang had arrived together and what that might imply in terms of the rumors of an impending betrothal.

He signaled the innkeeper for another bottle. His third. Fourth? It didn't really matter. It was still long enough before he needed to be back that he would sober up enough to make it through dinner. The thought of having to sit through a meal with Lan Wangji sitting next to MianMian was something he would definitely need a few drinks in him to make it through.

A pretty, young woman sitting with two of her friends had been watching him for a while. Wei Wuxian had noticed it, but quickly determined her as not a potential threat… just a civilian traveling with some friends. She blushed prettily when Wei Wuxian's eyes skimmed over her, lowering her eyes (but then looking up at him through her lashes). He could have flashed her his best grin and probably had her up in a guest room for the evening, but he didn't. He knew of men who found that sort of thing to be better than alcohol in blocking out thoughts that were too loud, but it was never something Wei Wuxian was particularly interested in, despite the many offers he'd had. He wasn't modest about his looks. More than enough people had told him he looked good, but more than enough people had also told him that he didn't have much to offer besides his looks, with no manners, no sect, no family, and controversial cultivation practices.

In the past, these statements didn't bother him. After all, he was an orphan who had been taken in on pure charity. The fact that he was even alive at all was something he should be grateful for. Nevermind that the woman who was supposed to be his adoptive mother loathed him and blamed him for every failing of the family. Or that his sect brother had often viewed him more as a reason for why he never received the praises or respect he felt he deserved.

Madam Yu had been the one to force him out of the Jiang sect, but even Jiang Fengmian hadn't had anything to say. He had just looked exhausted. Evidently over a decade of dealing with his wife's seething resentment about the rumors that Wei Wuxian was actually Jiang Fengmian's bastard son had taken their toll. And - at 17 - it wasn't like Wei Wuxian had been a child anymore, needing their protection. He'd had a home for nearly two decades and had done everything he could to earn his keep there, even making First Disciple at the age of 13. But in the end, it hadn't mattered.

The lesson Wei Wuxian had learned in that moment was that - no matter how hard he tried, no matter how hard he worked - it was never going to be enough to truly belong in a family who

had bloodline. He was the son of a servant, and his place in the world was defined by that.

Which was why he was so frustrated with himself. His feelings for Lan Wangji had snuck up on him, growing over time without his knowledge or consent. If he had realized it sooner, he would have avoided Lan Wangji like the plague, or at least tried to, before it was too late. Instead, he'd been an idiot and now the thought of watching Lan Wangji tie himself to someone else for the rest of his life was somehow even worse than being thrown out of Lotus Pier.

Wei Wuxian had never imagined himself being married, or having a cultivation partner, but he had always thought Lan Wangji would be with him, similarly unattached, and able to continue night hunting creatures of legend with him.

But now, Wei Wuxian would not be the one at Lan Wangji's side when he went on hunts. It would be someone else. Someone who - unlike Wei Wuxian - had the backing of a sect and a good reputation to offer. Someone who could bear him children. These were things that Wei Wuxian could never offer.

So fuck everything. For one night just… fuck. Everything.

He dug into his money pouch and left another piece of silver on the table as the innkeeper came and set another bottle down. There was nothing to be done about it. Lan Zhan would be forced to choose a spouse. One that will be by his side and practice joint cultivation, by Lan Zhan's own choice, and extend his life, if not indefinitely, then at least for a while longer.

Wei Wuxian chuckled hollowly, wondering at what point being the center of Lan Zhan's focus became so all-consuming for him. His first impression of Lan Wangji before they'd met had stemmed from the rumors he'd heard growing up. He knew that the man was beautiful and talented, but sort of a prim rule-follower. Maybe he'd be fun to tease, but really not all *that* interesting for someone as like Wei Wuxian, who prided himself in being unbound by rules.

After his fight with Lan Wangji, he had realized that he was still a prim rule-follower, but he was a prim rule-follower who could dismember his opponent without getting a speck of blood on his pristine white robes. This dichotomy between the calm, frigid obedience and the ruthless, decisive power that the man could unleash when he chose was much more interesting that just some stick-in-the mud that Wei Wuxian could annoy for fun. Although, he definitely had fun annoying Lan Wangji, but it was with a much different intent than it had been at first. There was nothing casual about Wei Wuxian's need to poke and test and disrupt the mindset of the Second Jade of Lan to learn more about where his limits were, what he cared about and what he would be willing to break his precious rules for. (Though - of course - Lan Zhan would volunteer for punishment immediately because he was just *that honest* .)

Wei Wuxian had always known that Lan Zhan had barely tolerated him for most of the time they'd known each other (in fact, often had NOT tolerated him). But it had been fine. Lan Zhan didn't really seem to tolerate *anyone* other than his brother and the younger disciples. Wei Wuxian had been content to be the one to irritate Lan Zhan enough to generate the tiny tick in Lan Zhan's jaw that would have been an apoplectic fit on anyone else. Or the side-eye that was like the unsheathing of a blade.

They had finally become... friends, and that was a unique position that Wei Wuxian had held with pride. Other than Lan Wangji's brother and uncle, Wei Wuxian was the only person who

could claim that title with any truth.

And it had been enough, or at least so he had thought.

Now that he was more aware of his feelings, it all seemed so ridiculously obvious that it was *never* going to be enough, and there was nothing Wei Wuxian could do about it.

Lan Qiren had made his stance on Wei Wuxian clear, and Lan Wangji was likely to be wed within the next few months to someone else, someone worthy, given the fervor around building fresh alliances to secure the peace.

He took a long sip of the baijiu, savoring the burn, and allowed himself to briefly fantasize about a world in which he could have offered for Lan Wangji's hand. Part of the criteria for a cultivation partner was their level of spiritual power. After all, the whole point was to build a sort of… *resonance* between the two golden cores which strengthens both of them. On that dimension, Wei Wuxian was pretty sure he was not being arrogant in saying he would have been the best choice. On that dimension *only,* of course. Unfortunately, that was the only criteria that Wei Wuxian could ever have met, and it was one that was completely irrelevant for a political marriage.

Wei Wuxian had been taught well enough to know his place in the world. The sects might not like him, but sometimes they needed him. Wei Wuxian was a sword kept sharpened in storage. And that was all he would ever be.

He lifted the jar to pour himself another cup of wine, but a long, slender hand stopped him, the pristine white silk of the sleeve glowing in the dim light of the tavern.

"Wei Ying." The heat of Lan Wangji's hand seemed to sear Wei Wuxian's forearm through his sleeve, before it was withdrawn.

Wei Wuxian closed his eyes, fighting the urge to chase after the touch and pull Lan Wangji's hand back and press it against him. There was something about the way that Lan Wangji - the epitome of rules and cold, formal politeness with everyone else - said Wei Wuxian's birth name. Knowing that Lan Wangji broke this major social taboo to speak his name so intimately. Usually, Wei Wuxian reveled in it, but at the moment it was a knife in his chest.

Would this end, too, when Lan Wangji was married to another? Surely any spouse would object to such an act, given the implications of it to outsiders.

"Lan Zhan. Shouldn't you still be stuck in that meeting with MianMian and your brother?"

He opened his eyes to see Lan Wangji's flicker with confusion.

"Wei Ying did not come back."

Wei Wuxian blinked, trying to understand what Lan Wangji was saying. The alcohol was making it more difficult than usual.

"Yeah, well… it's not like I have anything to do with sect business. I'm glad they've got the assholes who tried to hurt *Shijie* , but the rest of the stuff around trade negotiations and sect

alliances isn't something anyone would want my input on."

Lan Wangji looked… like something. Upset? Not exactly.

"I have not been able to speak with you for almost a month. You left. Twice."

Wei Wuxian wished his mind wasn't fuzzy, because then maybe he'd be able to think of some excuse for why he was avoiding Lan Wangji other than the truth. He couldn't exactly say 'I can't watch you with MianMian yet.' But it hadn't occurred to him that Lan Wangji actually had something to say to him.

"I thought you had just come to fetch me for the meeting," Wei Wuxian replied. It wasn't quite the truth, because Wei Wuxian had been so overwhelmed with seeing Lan Zhan *at all* that he hadn't even thought to wonder about why he was there in the first place. Wei Wuxian had been unable to get past his overwhelming surge of… whatever jumbled up mix of feelings were when Lan Wangji had appeared.

The look Lan Wangji gave Wei Wuxian was both skeptical and frustrated, which felt unfair to Wei Wuxian. The Second Jade of Lan had a lot of obligations, none of which included him now that the war was over. How was he supposed to have guessed that Lan Wangji had something to say to him?

"What? Lan Zhan, I'm still banned from GusuLan territories, so I can't help you on a night hunt, if that's what you're looking for." Lan Wangji frowned at Wei Wuxian's words which - fair enough. Wei Wuxian had never met a rule he wasn't willing to break. Regardless of whether or not Wei Wuxian was fully recovered, if Lan Wangji needed his help with a night hunt, Wei Wuxian would be more than happy to break Lan Qiren's edict. As long as Lan Wangji didn't get punished for it, at least. "I mean, I have no problem breaking the rules, so if you need me I definitely will come but I don't want you to get -"

"*Wei Ying* ," Lan Wangji interrupted, and this time he almost sounded angry.

Wei Wuxian could not deal with this at the moment. He'd tried to just stay out of everyone's way while he sorted his shit out. It was not his fault that Lan Wangji was looking angry and maybe even a little bit upset.

"Lan Zhan. If you have something that you need to tell me, then just fucking *tell* me. I'm not exactly in a state to guess at the moment." Wei Wuxian took advantage of the fact that Lan Wangji had loosened his grip on Wei Wuxian's arm to finish the last of his alcohol, drinking it directly from the jar.

A trickle of it missed his mouth and slid down the skin of his neck. Lan Wangji went utterly still, watching the bobbing of Wei Wuxian's throat and the path of the small droplets of alcohol that slid down his throat to disappear beneath the collar of his robes. Inexplicably, Wei Wuxian felt like the temperature in the room jumped several degrees, and his head spun dizzily under the intensity of Lan Wangji's stare.

The young woman who had been watching Wei Wuxian earlier seemed to find Wei Wuxian's defiance (or drunkenness) amusing, laughing softly and tilting her head down to look over at Wei Wuxian through her eyelashes. Wei Wuxian put on his best smirk, lounging back in his seat in the way that always seemed to irritate Lan Wangji, with his head lolled to one side, baring the

long line of his throat that still held the wet sheen of the alcohol, and his legs sprawled inelegantly apart.

Lan Wangji looked over at the young woman, then back to Wei Wuxian.

The air seemed to crackle, and suddenly Wei Wuxian found his wrist nearly crushed in the vice-like grip of Lan Wangji's hand. With his free hand, Lan Wangji took the now-empty jar of alcohol from Wei Wuxian's hand and slammed it down on the table.

Wei Wuxian's eyes flared wide in shock, at the same time he felt a flood of heat rush south. He desperately hoped that Lan Wangji only noticed one of those two reactions.

"Wei Ying has had enough. I will escort you to your rooms. We have things to discuss privately."

Lan Wangji looked *furious* , just like he used to back when he caught Wei Wuxian breaking rules or flirting when they were in Cloud Recesses as youths. Wei Wuxian suddenly found himself being pulled to his feet, with Lan Wangji's hand still wrapped bruisingly tight around his wrist.

Wei Wuxian knew he should be annoyed or offended or *something* at the proprietary air with which Lan Wangji was treating him. They were no longer students in Cloud Recesses together, and Lan Zhan had no right to enforce rules with him.

The alcohol made him stumble, and Lan Wangji's other hand steadied him at his hip and...

Oh, shit. Wei Wuxian was suddenly realizing that he is *very into* Lan Wangji manhandling him and it was very definitely not the kind of response Lan Wangji would be even remotely ok with. Wei Wuxian forced himself to lean back, out of Lan Wangji's personal space, even as a slightly manic laugh escaped his lips. His forbidden fantasies about Lan Zhan were now most definitely going to include Lan Wangji punishing him for drinking in ways that he was very sure the virtuous Second Jade would be appalled at. Wei Wuxian would unpack that about himself later, but he could not deal with it when Lan Wangji was standing right there, so close, looking at him intently.

So he did what he always did when faced with emotions that he didn't understand swirling through him, and played it off as a joke.

"Lan Zhan! So forward! If you wanted to take me to my rooms, all you had to do was ask. No need to be such a brute about it!"

Lan Wangji seemed to realize the impropriety at the same time, and he released Wei Wuxian's wrist and stepped back as though burned. He glared at Wei Wuxian for a moment, eyes locked on his face as though he could read everything that was going on beneath its surface. Wei Wuxian certainly hoped the man could not, or he'd likely find himself facing the sharp end of Bichen.

"Mark your words," was all Lan Wangji said before he abruptly turned and stalked over to the exit of the inn. He looked back over his shoulder once to glare at Wei Wuxian and make sure he was following.

Wei Wuxian stumbled slightly, only partly due to the alcohol, but made his way towards the exit. None of what was happening made any sense at all to him, but he had always been more than

willing to follow Lan Wangji whenever the man would let him.

“Wei Ying should be more careful,” Lan Wangji said sharply, noticing the swaying motion of Wei Wuxian’s steps as they made their way down the narrow street towards the main hall.

He did not grab Wei Wuxian to steady him this time, though his hand clenched tightly around Bichen’s hilt. He maintained at least a somewhat socially acceptable distance between them as they walked. Wei Wuxian hated it, but he wasn’t quite drunk enough to actually do anything about it.

Instead, he laughed once again. “Lan Zhan! I’m really not that drunk. I’ve fought demons and laid ghosts to rest in worse shape than this, you know.”

Lan Wangji did not slow his pace, but he did throw another glare over his shoulder. “Irresponsible. Wei Ying should not be night hunting alone, much less while intoxicated.”

Wei Wuxian felt his stomach twist. He had missed night hunting with Lan Wangji more than he would admit. The alcohol had loosened his tongue enough that didn’t really manage to hide the bitterness in his tone when he replied.

“I’ve been drinking since I was twelve, Lan Zhan. I can handle my alcohol. And it’s not like I have anyone to night hunt with, so I’m afraid I won’t be able to take Hanguang Jun up on his excellent advice.”

Lan Wangji abruptly stopped at the entrance to the main hall, and turned to look at Wei Wuxian. There was a short, tense silence, where Lan Wangji stared at him with the same intensity he had in the tavern, and Wei Wuxian didn’t know what it meant or what to do about it.

“I will night hunt with Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji stated, implacably.

Wei Wuxian gave a slightly derisive snort. As much as he wished it could be true, it wasn’t and Lan Wangji was being either cruel or naive to make such a promise when there was no way a new spouse, much less his own sect leaders, would let him keep it.

“Lan Zhan. Your sect is going to have you married to a proper wife within the next three months. You’re not going to be able to night hunt with me.”

Wei Wuxian’s words only seemed to make Lan Wangji dig his heels in more, based on the rigid set of his perfect jaw.

“I will night hunt with Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji repeated bitingly, then turned in a fluid swirl of white silk and continued his purposeful stride into the building. Wei Wuxian didn’t know how to respond, so he simply followed, his mind spinning frantically but coming up with not even a single coherent thought.

They had reached the door to Wei Wuxian’s room, which somehow Lan Wangji seemed to recognize, as he pushed the door open. He held the door, looking expectantly at Wei Wuxian until he entered. Wei Wuxian followed him in, not exactly sure what to do about the fact that the man he’d been fantasizing about, the man he had *jacked off to the night before in his bed* was now standing in the room with him.

Lan Wangji closed the door behind them, and Wei Wuxian walked to the far side of the room to maximize distance between them and hopefully get his brain to function. He belatedly realized that he was now standing dangerously close to the bed, but as long as Lan Wangji stayed on the other side of the room, it should be fine.

“Not a wife. A cultivation partner.”

It took Wei Wuxian’s drink-muddled brain a moment to catch up with what Lan Wangji was referring to. When he did, he felt a rush of possessive anger flare through him with the same visceral reaction he’d had when Lan Wangji had stated a similar sentiment earlier in the day.

He took a step towards the man, but managed to stop himself before taking it further. Still, he didn’t hold his words back.

“Lan Zhan. You hate people getting in your personal space, much less in your bed. How do you expect to be able to tolerate having a cultivation partner?” the words came out angrier than Wei Wuxian had meant, but an answering flare of... anger? seemed to light in Lan Wangji’s eyes.

Lan Wagji narrowed his eyes, his whole body shifting in a way that reminded Wei Wuxian of how the man looked on a night hunt. Unlike Wei Wuxian, Lan Wangji seemed to have no issues closing the distance between them as he slowly stalked towards Wei Wuxian. He didn’t stop until he was less than an arm’s reach away, the air between them seeming to spark dangerously, just like it had back at the inn.

Wei Wuxian could feel the heat from Lan Wangji’s body, warming the space between them. Lan Wangji’s gaze was locked on his, and for one wild, insane moment, Wei Wuxian thought Lan Wangji might lean in and kiss him.

Wei Wuxian wasn’t sure if it was all in his head, or if it was relating to the ‘tuning’ that Wen Qing had mentioned, but he swore he could *feel* Lan Wangji’s qi dancing along his skin, even though they weren’t even touching. He tried and failed to shut out memories of what it felt like to have the cool, blue spiritual energy of the Second Jade pushing into his body. His skin felt like it was on fire, and the hairs on the back of his neck were standing on end. They were not the only part of his body beginning to stand to attention at the moment, and he desperately hoped that Lan Wangji did not look down, and that his multiple layers of robes would conceal anything from sight if he did.

“I have no reluctance with physical proximity with Wei Ying.”

Wei Wuxian knew his mouth had fallen open, but there was nothing he could do about it. Because… what the fuck?

“Lan Zhan?” Wei Wuxian choked out.

Lan Wangji stared at him for a moment, and seemed to be visibly struggling with his control, which was something Wei Wuxian had never seen him need to do in all their years of fighting together. Lan Wangji’s breath was coming in short, shallow gasps and his eyes were dark as they stayed steadily locked on Wei Wuxian. It wasn’t quite anger, but nothing else made any sense and Wei Wuxian didn’t know what was going on but he felt like he was going to explode out of sheer tension if something didn’t happen.

Lan Wangji seemed to be feeling some of the same pressure, because he closed his eyes and drew two deep, meditative breaths before opening them again. The odd heat in his eyes was gone, or at least banked, and Wei Wuxian felt himself finally able to breathe again with the return of the cool and composed face of his friend restored.

“Sleep,” Lan Wangji said, pressing on Wei Wuxian’s chest, gently but firmly forcing Wei Wuxian to sit down on the bed. “We will discuss this when you are sober. I will see to A-Yuan while you rest.”

Wei Wuxian absolutely did not shiver at the touch. He also really hoped that Lan Wangji was not going to push him to lay down flat on his back, because otherwise it would become very obvious that Wei Wuxian’s body was wildly misinterpreting Lan Wangji’s strict adherence to rules as… something else.

Luckily, Lan Wangji did not linger and seemed to need to be free of the tension as much as Wei Wuxian did. He gave a short, sharp nod, then abruptly turned and left, leaving a lingering trace of the scent of sandalwood behind. Wei Wuxian flopped back on his bed, feeling as though invisible strings that had been holding him up had been cut. The room was spinning at the same chaotic pace that his mind was, and he cursed the fact that his sister had made him aware of what he really felt about Lan Wangji.

To be continued...

Chapter 38: The rules of engagement

A/N - Ok. We are really starting to move here. Once again, I am a week early! Thank you for all of your lovely comments... they are part of why I am so early, because you got me so pumped up about finishing this! If you are uncomfortable reading about the physical aspects of liking someone, skip the last section of this chapter that starts with "Dinner ended..". But it will miss the explanation of what the "rules of engagement" are, so I have put them at the end in the A/N.

Thank you so much to ZazGeek for beta-ing this for me!!

Wei Wuxian woke feeling slightly groggy, with the familiar, gentle dullness of having drunk too much before sleeping. Memories of what had happened at the tavern flooded back, causing him to sit bolt upright in bed. He groaned, ignoring the minor dryness in his mouth which was the only residual effect of the alcohol he had drunk earlier in the day (and even that was unusual, with Wei Wuxian being blessed with an unusual alcohol tolerance even as a youth). He was somewhat surprised that he had actually managed to fall asleep after Lan Wangji had left, but the alcohol combined with his physical exhaustion from pushing his body harder than he'd been used to earlier that morning had worked against him.

A quick glance at the window told him that it was approaching dinner time. He was surprised that Wen Yuan hadn't come looking for him, but he supposed that Lan Wangji had found some way to entertain the child while Wei Wuxian slept. The thought made him curious as to what the two of them might be doing. Lan Wangji was so cold and still to most people, and A-Yuan always was full of energy and affection. He found himself smiling at the thought of what they would look like, playing together.

He pushed the coverlet off and levered himself out of bed, grateful - not for the first time - that alcohol had only minimal after-effects for him. He used the wash basin and cloth to clean himself, knowing it would take too long for a full bath to be brought but wanting to be at least somewhat tidied before he went in search of Lan Wangji and A-Yuan.

Wei Wuxian felt some of the odd tension coiling back into his body as he recalled the conversation he'd had with Lan Wangji in his rooms earlier. For a moment, Wei Wuxian had thought that Lan Wangji had wanted to kiss him.

It hadn't happened, of course. Wei Wuxian had likely just projected his own desires on Lan Wangji. But still, there had been *something.*

"Not a wife. A cultivation partner," Lan Wangji had said.

Just because he had said that, it didn't mean the cultivation partner would be Wei Wuxian. Except that was not all that Lan Wangji had said, and he was not one to say words without thought or meaning.

"I have no reluctance with physical proximity with Wei Ying."

Wei Wuxian reminded himself of the many reasons why he was likely misreading this. Lan Wangji had probably been annoyed at Wei Wuxian's insinuation that he would not be able to meet the demands of marriage and had meant that 'if he could learn to tolerate Wei Ying, he could tolerate someone else who was less annoying as well.'

That was the only thing that made sense.

The Lan elders needed a political alliance, not a cultivation partner. Even if they were willing to be flexible on that point due to their love of Lan Wangji, they *hated* Wei Wuxian and had banned him from not just Cloud Recesses but all of GusuLan. And then there was Lan Wangji himself. While he had certainly shown that he no longer actively *disliked* Wei Wuxian like he had in the past, he also had never shown any romantic interest in him, either. They were great at night hunting together, and respected each other and were… friends? But Lan Wangji had never been interested in flirting or kissing or sex for as long as Wei Wuxian had known him. If anything, he had seemed annoyed and mildly offended by the idea of all of it.

Still.

There had been that moment when Lan Wangji had boxed him in, looking at him with an intensity that had been… something. Lan Wangji had said that they would talk when Wei Wuxian had sobered up.

He was sober now. And he was going to find Lan Zhan.

It didn't take long for Wei Wuxian to find them. Hanguang-Jun was a figure that people took note of, and Wen Yuan had made friends with just about every person in the main hall. With just a few inquiries, Wei Wuxian found himself directed to a small courtyard just outside the kitchen.

The sight that greeted him stole his breath and made his chest feel both warm and painfully tight all at the same time.

Lan Wangji was sitting elegantly on the flagstone ground with A-Yuan crouched next to him. The warm, orange-glow of the late-evening sun filtered through the air, causing a halo-like effect around their heads. The white of Lan Wangji's robes caught the light and seemed to glow with it, his sleeves fluttering with the evening breeze and moving with a soft, susserated sound.

A-Yuan appeared to have found the den where the kitchen cat (who was kept to keep mice and rats away from the food stores) had recently given birth to a batch of kittens only a week or two ago. Wen Yuan had endless curiosity and excitement about the world around him, despite all the tragedy he'd suffered. It was one of the things that Wei Wuxian loved the most fiercely about the child he had come to think of as his own.

Growing up, Wei Wuxian's endless curiosity had generally exhausted and or annoyed the people around him, resulting more often than not in being told to piss off or shut up, if not being outright disciplined for talking too much. Given the Lan sect's overall austere and rigid culture, he was shocked to see the calm, focused way that Lan Wangji was paying attention to Wen Yuan's excited chatter and rapid fire questions about what kittens ate and how they were born and what they needed to be safe and ' *Look how soft, rich-gege* !'

The hands that had gripped Wei Wuxian's wrist so tightly just hours ago were now gently guiding A-Yuan's as they lifted the smallest kitten from the litter for A-Yuan to hold.

Every question from A-Yuan was patiently answered in the order it was asked, even when they came several in a row all piled on top of each other. Lan Wangji gave A-Yuan the same focused attention he gave his sect elders, and was endlessly gentle and patient as he showed A-Yuan how to safely hold the kittens.

Wei Wuxian had never had anyone be that gentle and focused on him when he was young, but it was all he could ever wish for for A-Yuan.

Lan Zhan will be an amazing father, when he has children of his own.

The thought struck Wei Wuxian like lightning, and he had to force his lungs to work with how fiercely he wanted to be there for that. How much he wanted A-Yuan to have that sort of solid, steady care in his life.

The wind picked up, blowing a strand of hair across Wei Wuxian's face, and he lifted a hand to brush it away. The motion caught Lan Wangji's attention, and his gaze shifted from A-Yuan to lock on Wei Wuxian.

The intensity of the look in Lan Wangji's eyes seemed to suck all the air out of Wei Wuxian's lungs. Before he could catch his breath, Lan Wangji was rising and walking over to him.

"Wei Ying," he said, studying Wei Wuxian's face. "How are you feeling?"

Wei Wuxian opened his mouth to reply, but he was cut off by an excited cry from A-Yuan.

"Xian-gege! Come see the kittens! They are tiny and drink only milk now but when they grow up they won't drink milk at all and will hunt instead! Rich-gege told me!"

Wei Wuxian smiled at A-Yuan, though his whole body was tuned to Lan Wangji's presence, less than an arm's length away.

"Coming!" Wei Wuxian said, then turned back to Lan Wangji.

"I'm fine. Alcohol doesn't really affect me that much, you know."

They walked over to Wen Yuan, Lan Wangji gracefully sat down on the ground again with his ever-perfect posture while Wei Wuxian sprawled out on the other side of Wen Yuan, who was excitedly showing Wei Wuxian the kittens and repeating every scrap of knowledge Lan Wangji had shared with him.

Wei Wuxian was grateful that A-Yuan's focus was firmly on the kittens, because Wei Wuxian looked over at Lan Wangji, and met golden eyes looking back at him. He struggled to get his lungs to keep working, and his heart was rabbiting frantically in his chest.

He was so in love with Lan Wangji that he was drowning in it. Had it always been like this?

He sort of thought it had.

"Wei Ying. We must talk."

Lan Wangji's words were steady, a life line that somehow soothed Wei Wuxian at the same time it tightened around him like a vice.

Wei Wuxian nodded, his mind sluggishly trying to find a way to extricate them from A-Yuan for a little while, since he was very sure this was not a conversion that they should have in front of others.

"Wei-gongzi. A-Yuan. Hanguang-Jun. Dinner is being served. Jiejie sent me to bring you in."

Wen Ning appeared, and Wei Wuxian had to force himself to look away from Lan Wangji and greet his friend.

"Wen Ning. Can you take A-Yuan to get washed up?"

A-Yuan made a noise of distress at the impending separation from the kittens, but his stomach growled, making the argument so the adults wouldn't have to.

"You may return to see them after you have finished your meal," Lan Wangji stated as he stood, brushing off invisible specs of dirt from his white robes. Wei Wuxian had spent much less time on the ground, but somehow had managed to get more dirt on him than Lan Wangji.

Wen Ning looked thoughtfully from Wei Wuxian to Lan Wangji, then gave a nod. "I can take A-Yuan. We'll meet you in the hall."

People would come looking for them if they delayed too long, but a few moments alone were better than nothing. The end of the war had meant that no one had free time, especially not people like Hanguang-Jun, who were in demand for political conversations as well as dealing with restless spirits that the war left strewn about the lands like rice. He needed to take whatever opportunity was given to him, but he didn't know how to start the conversation that they had put on hold from earlier.

"Wei Ying."

Wei Wuxian turned to face him, surprised that - of the two of them - Lan Wangji had been the first to speak.

"I was confused about our interactions since I returned. You were avoiding me. You were… angry."

Wei Wuxian looked away, not really sure what to say. He *had* been avoiding Lan Wangji.

"I wasn't… angry. I was just…" Confused? Upset? Jealous? He didn't really know, and didn't have a right to feel any of those things, anyway.

"Wei Ying said my sect would have me married to a proper wife. I was not aware of the rumors regarding Luo Qinyiang."

Wei Wuxian felt his face heat up, still turned away from Lan Wangji.

"Gossip is forbidden," Wei Wuxian quoted, not sure if he was teasing Lan Wangji or acknowledging that it wasn't surprising that the man hadn't heard the whispers, given how he

kept himself separated from that sort of conversation.

“I am not interested in a marriage with Luo Qingyiang.”

Wei Wuxian was torn between a fierce relief and a desire to defend MianMian.

“MianMian is great, though! And you two work so well together. She’s got a good reputation in the cultivation world, and - even though she’s not bloodline - she’s still got close ties with the new Jin sect leader. You can’t tell me your uncle and the other elders aren’t pressuring you to make an offer for her.”

“I am not interested in a marriage with Luo Qingyiang,” Lan Wangji repeated stubbornly.

Despite how much the topic was twisting him up inside, Wei Wuxian found himself smiling at the implacable tone in Lan Wangji’s voice.

“Lan Zhan. You probably aren’t going to be given a choice in this. That’s not the way these things work. You’re the sect heir.”

“I have told the elders it is impossible, as it would violate sect rules.”

Wei Wuxian’s eyebrows rose in surprise. “Your sect has a rule against arranged marriages?”

It seemed odd, because almost every sect had had arranged marriages and he was pretty sure he remembered reading about several of them in the study of GusuLan history.

Lan Wangji shook his head once.

“Not against arranged marriages. It is forbidden to pledge affection to one if it is already owned by another. Desire for one other than one’s spouse is forbidden. Placing loyalty to another above loyalty to one’s spouse is forbidden.”

Wei Wuxian had always prided himself on his intellect, but Lan Wangji’s words were not making sense to him no matter how he tried to force them to. Lan Wangji had said he would not marry anyone the clan tried to arrange for him. Because it would violate a set of rules that seemed to imply that Lan Wangji already had feelings for someone else. Someone that his sect would not approve of.

And he was standing in front of Wei Wuxian, looking at him intently, studying Wei Wuxian’s face with a tension that was beyond anything Wei Wuxian was prepared to interpret.

Lan Wangji had said he wanted a cultivation partner.

“Lan Zhan?” Wei Wuxian breathed, not willing to put into words what he was starting to hope, still waiting for reality to come crashing back down and remind him all the very important reasons why this could not possibly be what he was thinking.

“I will night hunt with Wei Ying. I will not marry anyone else.”

Wei Wuxian could not respond, his voice was frozen in his throat. Lan Wangji was not proposing, because how could he, with his sect so against Wei Wuxian? But it was a

commitment. It was a confession. Lan Wangji said he would not marry anyone *else.* Wei Wuxian needed to reply, if he could just get his mouth to work.

He drew a shaky breath, the tip of his tongue darting out to wet lips that were suddenly dry as dust. Lan Wangji's eyes tracked the movement, and the thick electricity he had felt at the tavern was back in the air that stood between them.

"Wei Wuxian!" Jiang Cheng's voice sliced across the courtyard like his whip. "Everyone's waiting. Get your ass in here!"

Wei Wuxian was not able to move, wasn't even able to turn his gaze away from Lan Wangji to acknowledge his brother's words. Luckily, Lan Wangji had more control, though his eyes sparked with annoyance and frustration as he turned to acknowledge the source of the interruption.

"Jiang Wanyin," Lan Wangji's voice was the exact opposite of welcoming, but Jiang Cheng had received far harsher greetings from his own mother, and didn't even blink.

Lan Wangji placed his hand on Wei Wuxian's lower back, the heat of the touch searing through the layers of cloth that separated them as he gently pressed Wei Wuxian in the direction they needed to move.

"We will speak after eating," Lan Wangji said quietly, ignoring the huff of the impatient, purple-garbed man watching them approach.

Wei Wuxian somehow managed to gather himself enough to not trip over his own feet as they walked to the hall, where so many cultivators were already waiting.

Wei Wuxian was not sure how he made it through the dinner. He was also not sure if he actually managed to eat anything, though he *was* at least sure he had fed A-Yuan. All of his concentration was on the steady, solid presence of the man seated on the other side of A-Yuan from him.

Lan Wangji looked as serene as always as he gracefully placed two pork dumplings in A-Yuan's bowl. No one mentioned the way that Jiang Cheng was glaring at Lan Wangji throughout the meal, nor Nie MIngjue's amusement as Lan Wangji continued to place food in A-Yuan's bowl and see to his needs almost as much as Wei Wuxian himself did. Wei Wuxian did not know how to read the frequent looks between his sister and Nie Huaisang, nor the sharp ones from Wen Qing that were directed their way.

The entire room seemed to be having a conversation about something that Wei Wuxian himself was involved with, but excluded from being told about before-hand.

Shijie at least smiled at him kindly, with the smile she used to give him when he was struggling with mastering a new technique and was assuring him that he would figure it out soon.

If Wei Wuxian was struggling trying to sort out what was going on *outside* his head, he was even more overwhelmed by the tangle of thoughts *within* it.

Even his extremely clever, agile mind was not able to spin Lan Wangji's words as anything other than a statement that - whether or not he was able to marry Wei Ying due to politics - he would

remain by his side and would not marry anyone else. This ran in the face of the filial duty Lan Wangji had as heir to the Lan Sect. It ran against so much of what *defined* Hanguang-Jun, as being a man of loyalty and self-sacrifice.

Lan Wangji making this choice made no sense. It was a mistake, and Wei Wuxian did not want to be Hanguang-Jun's first and only mistake.

A sickening thought struck Wei Wuxian. Maybe Lan Wangji just felt indebted to him for warning the Lan sect about the Wen invasion. Hanguang-Jun was nothing if not honorable. Did he feel this was a debt to be paid? Had he somehow detected Wei Wuxian's feelings even before Wei Wuxian had himself, and felt like this was what was owed? The thought made his stomach turn.

Or maybe it was due to their bond during the war. There were many bonds of brotherhood that were formed in such circumstances, and many of those crossed the boundaries of what would be considered anything but brotherly. Was this all just some sort of trauma brainwashing that Wei Wuxian had unintentionally ensnared Lan Wangji with when he asked him to accompany him?

Wei Wuxian nearly jumped when a large, firm hand pressed against his forearm. Lan Wangji's cool, soothing qi flowed into him where the man's fingers brushed against the back of Wei Wuxian's bare wrist.

"Making assumptions is forbidden. Wait until we speak."

Wei Wuxian looked up to find Lan Wangji's steady gaze on him, the white-silk-encased arm passing behind Wen Yuan's shoulders to reach Wei Wuxian's wrist. The solid weight of Lan Wangji's touch grounded Wei Wuxian, causing his churning stomach to settle.

Wei Wuxian was embarrassed that his face must have been doing something that let Lan Wangji read so much of his thoughts, but he felt steadier nonetheless.

A-Yuan looked between them curiously, asking whether there would be sweets after dinner or not. The distraction was enough for Wei Wuxian to get himself under control.

Lan Wangji removed his hand from Wei Wuxian's wrist, but kept his arm around Wen Yuan (earning another amused look from Nie MIngjue), his hand resting right beside Wei Wuxian's on the table as the meal continued uneventfully around them. Jiang Cheng scowled even more fiercely at them, but Nie Huaisang and Jiang Yanli exchanged what could only be called a smug look.

Wei Wuxian decided to ignore everything except wiping A-Yuan's mouth and hoped the meal would end quickly.

Dinner ended and Jiang Yanli appeared at Wei Wuxian's shoulder, offering to take A-Yuan and help him with his bath. Wei Wuxian wondered if he should invite Lan Wangji back to his rooms, but A-Yuan would be there soon and this was definitely not a conversation that should be had in front of the child.

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji gave Wei Wuxian a look and then turned and walked down the corridor in the direction the sleeping chambers were located, but - before reaching either of their rooms -

turned into a small room that was empty save for what appeared to be a writing desk and a few chairs.

Wei Wuxian followed him inside, wishing that he could keep his mind as still and calm as Lan Wangji seemed to be able to do. That was not a skill that Wei Wuxian would likely ever master, however, so he gave up and instead focused on what he needed to say. The words kept racing through his head in a jumbled swirl, all tangled up with no clear starting place nor conclusion.

The door closed behind them, and Wei Wuxian's lips were moving before Lan Wangji had even turned around to face him.

"Lan Zhan. You have to be more careful about what you say. If people overheard you, earlier, they might think you were saying you wanted me as a cultivation partner." Wei Wuxian made himself say the words that his thoughts had been skirting around all through dinner.

Lan Wangji's cultivation partner.

Lan Wangji wanting *Wei Wuxian* to be his cultivation partner.

The idea was more dangerous to Wei Wuxian's sanity than any amount of demonic cultivation could ever be.

It was impossible.

Lan Wangji simply looked at him, as though Wei Wuxian hadn't just said something completely insane.

"Who else but Wei Ying?"

Wei Wuxian thought he might actually have lost his mind. Maybe he was hallucinating and this was just some fever dream.

" *Anyone else* but me, Lan Zhan! Literally *anyone else* would be a better choice."

A small furrow appeared between Lan Wagnji's brows, displeasure clear in his expression. Wei Wuxian had been around Lan Wangji long enough to be able to recognize the stubborn set of his jaw. Lan Wangji was preparing to dig his heels in, and Wei Wuxian needed to head this off at the pass.

Wei Wuxian knew what the right thing to do was, and it was not to take Lan Wangji up on whatever self-sacrificing offer he was about to make. But still, Wei Wuxian was only one man and if Lan Wangji actually *offered* , Wei Wuxian was not fully sure he could say no.

"Lan Zhan. It doesn't make any sense. I know we have fought together, and - because of that - you've learned to tolerate my presence. But marrying someone or being their cultivation partner is so much more than just being able to tolerate them."

Lan Wangji's eyes flashed, his lips parting, and Wei Wuxian spoke louder and faster, desperate to get the words out before Lan Wangji said something they would both regret.

“Your sect *hates* me. It’s not just a matter of approval or disapproval. They would lock me up for the rest of my life or possibly even execute me for being a heretical cultivator if they had the chance. Even before the war, when all they were looking for was someone who could match you in cultivation, I would have been a stretch. I’m the son of a servant and you’re the heir to GusuLan.”

“It does not matter,” Lan Wangji began, but Wei Wuxian was having none of it.

“Lan *Zhan* . Don’t say ridiculous things like you always accuse me of. You’ve spent your whole life meditating, cultivating, and studying the rules in GusuLan. You have a lot of experience night hunting, but you don’t really have that much experience interacting with people. You have to be more careful with what you say. You say you want a cultivation partner, but I’d bet you haven’t even kissed someone yet! You don’t really have an interest in that sort of thing. Which is fine! Lan Zhan is so good of a cultivator, he doesn’t need such things! You really need to research more before you start talking about… things like that. Luckily, I know my Lan Zhan and I know not to take what you say so seriously! You think you might be able to tolerate me...,” Wei Wuxian stumbled over the words. He couldn’t keep saying them aloud, making it seem real when it wasn’t. “... in that way. More than you would be able to tolerate other people. But the only reason you *think* that is because you just haven’t had the chance to work with other cultivators as much as you have with me, because I’m always getting into insane shit and bringing you down with me. That’s not… Lan Zhan! You deserve someone so much better! I am very annoying. You’ve said so yourself, many times! There are people way more tolerable than me. You shouldn’t rush into this.

“You’re the heir to GusuLan, the sect that has the reputation for being the most strict on pretty much *everything* . And of all the disciples of GusuLan, Hanguang-Jun is known as the *best* . The most devout, the most filial. Everyone knows this, Lan Zhan! Even without that, you’re famous as a powerful cultivator. When it comes to marriage, you pretty much just need to pick someone and point at them and they will *sprint* to your elders to make a marriage offer. They’d be pounding down your door.”

“Wei *Ying*. ” Lan Zhan didn’t seem impressed by what Wei Wuxian was saying.

“No, seriously. You will need to have the junior disciples stay off the path to the Jingshi when you make your choice, because they might get run down.” Wei Wuxian gesticulated wildly, pacing back and forth, his body filled with a restless, dissatisfied energy.

“Mm,” Lan Zhan replied, his gaze shifting from annoyed to calculating.

“In fact, you wouldn’t even need to wait for them to come to you. Lan Zhan, you must have been spending so much time with all the other high profile cultivators over the past few weeks, with all the negotiations going on. If there is anyone who caught your eye, even if you’re not sure yet, you can spend more time with them. Get to know them. Anyone would want to spend more time with Lan Zhan if they had the chance!”

Wei Wuxian couldn’t exactly imagine Lan Wangji doing the traditional courting methods, as that tended to involve more talking than Lan Wangji was usually up for, but a cultivation partner could be won in other ways.

“Take them night hunting with you!” Wei Wuxian exclaimed. “Seriously, Lan Zhan. Anyone who goes night hunting with you even *once* would want to be your cultivation partner. Lan Zhan is so skilled, and so beautiful when he fights! No one could resist you, Lan Zhan. You just need to get out there and give people a chance. You deserve the best. Don’t just settle for someone who doesn’t even have a sect behind them, just because you’ve been forced to deal with them for a while by war and demon tortoises.”

Wei Wuxian didn’t know why he was feeling slightly nauseous at his own words. He knew them to be true, though and Lan Wangji deserved whoever he wanted.

He felt the weight of Lan Wangji’s stare, and looked up to find amber eyes locked intently on him. Lan Wangji always had a pretty intense stare but this was… more. Wei Wuxian met his gaze until he felt like he was going to come out of his own skin.

“Wei Ying says I deserve the best?”

It felt like a trap, but Wei Wuxian couldn’t tell what it was. Lan Wangji *did* deserve the best. That was just the truth.

“Yes. Only the best for Lan Zhan.”

“Mark your words.”

Lan Wangji began walking slowly towards him, the air heavy with intent. Wei Wuxian might be the most powerful cultivator that had ever lived, but in that moment he felt like prey, rather than the predator the world knew him to be.

“Wei Ying thinks that I do not know others well enough to make him my choice.”

Step.

“Wei Ying thinks that I should marry an equal.”

Step.

“Wei Ying thinks I should marry someone my sect elders will give their blessing to.”

Step.

“Wei Ying believes I do not desire him, but only tolerate him.”

Step.

“Wei Ying does not believe I know what a cultivation partner really means. Because I have not kissed anyone.”

Step.

Lan Wangji was now only half an arm’s length away from where Wei Wuxian was standing. Wei Wuxian’s pulse was racing, the heat of his body spiking up as he focused on Lan Wangji’s words.

“I… yes. Lan Zhan, yes, all those things are true.”

Lan Wangji gave a small nod, not in agreement but in acknowledgement of Wei Wuxian’s response.

“Anything else?”

Wei Wuxian wondered if the alcohol he had consumed earlier had somehow reappeared in his system, because his thoughts were getting fuzzy again with Lan Wangji standing so close, focused on him so completely. The subtle scent of sandalwood made it even more clear that he was in Lan Wagnji’s personal space. A place that was usually fiercely off limits. Silence stretched, and Wei Wuxian realized that Lan Wangji had asked him something.

“What?”

“Do you have other objections to being my cultivation partner?”

Wei Wuxian sucked in a breath as though he’d been punched. He had been trying so hard to avoid having Lan Wangji speak those words aloud. Even if they came at the end of a long list of reasons why it wouldn’t work.

But Lan Wangji appeared to be waiting for his answer, so Wei Wuxian quickly reviewed what Lan Wangji had said.

“I mean. Being a cultivation partner is not just *kissing* , Lan Zhan. I’m not saying you have to do that before a commitment, because of the rules you have about promiscuity, but. Just. Think about it.”

Lan Wangji gave a short nod, though his expression looked heated. Almost angry, but… not. Or, at least, not *only* anger.

“Any concerns about what Wei Ying wants?” Lan Wangji’s voice was steady and methodical. As though they weren't talking about things that were totally crazy like Wei Wuxian somehow *not wanting* Lan Wangji in any way he could possibly have him.

But even Wei Wuxian’s shamelessness had limits, so all he could do was give a scoffing huff and a soft headshake.

“Very well,” Lan Wangji said, as though they’d just negotiated something binding rather than confirming that this was never going to happen.

“Some will take time. Others will not.”

With that cryptic sentence, Lan Wangji stepped forward, closing the distance between them. One large hand closed on the nape of Wei Wuxian’s neck, the fingers tangling into his hair while the other settled firmly on Wei Wuxian’s hip.

Lan Wangji tightened his grip slowly enough that Wei Wuxian could have objected. He could have stepped back, or fought the way his body was arching, his head being pulled inexorably back as his hip was anchored in place.

Wei Wuxian did not object.

Instead, a hot spike of arousal lanced through him. He tried to tamp it down, but it burned too hotly. Surely, Wei Wuxian was missing something, interpreting something very wrong. There was no way...

“Lan Zhan, what-?” Wei Wuxian was too shocked by the feel of Lan Wangji’s thigh sliding purposefully between his legs to finish the thought.

“Wei Ying said kissing was required.”

An instant after the words left Lan Wangji’s lips, Wei Wuxian’s brain ceased to function because Lan Wangji’s mouth was moving against his own. Wei Wuxian had never really given much thought to what the physical sensation of a real kiss would be, how the mechanics of it would work beyond two sets of lips pressing together. But Lan Wangji’s lips were firm against his own just as Lan Wangji’s thumb slid along the side of his throat to press along the hinge of Wei Wuxian’s jaw, guiding Wei Wuxian’s mouth to open as they moved together.

Wei Wuxian’s entire grasp on reality seemed to shake as he was faced with the incontrovertible fact that Lan Zhan, Lan Wangji, Hanguang Jun was *kissing him.*

Wei Wuxian was so shocked that it was all he could do to relax his jaw and follow along, which also made no sense because, of the two of them, Wei Wuxian had always assumed that Lan Wangji thought even *less* about things like kissing than Wei Wuxian did. But somehow Lan Wangji was aggressively taking the lead, pressing into Wei Wuxian with both his body and his mouth.

Lan Wangji kissed like he fought: forceful, commanding, and sure. Wei Wuxian had never really thought about what kind of kissing he would be into, but the answer was definitely *this* , being held in the bruising grip of Lan Wangji’s hands while his mouth was pressed open by Lan Wangji’s lips. A dark curl of desire snaked through Wei Wuxian’s lower dantian and further south as a dangerous thought emerged in his mind, whether Lan Wangji would fuck the same way as he kissed.

The tip of Lan Wangji’s tongue brushed against Wei Wuxian’s lower lip, sending the sensitive nerve endings tingling, just as Lan Wangji sent a tendril of *qi* through where his fingertips were pressing into the nape of Wei Wuxian’s neck as he gripped his hair tighter, his teeth nipping at Wei Wuxian’s lower lip before his tongue returned to soothe the sharp sting.

The feel of Lan Wangji’s cool, powerful spiritual energy surging into him at the same time the heat of Lan Wangji’s hot, velvet-soft tongue was pressing between Wei Wuxian’s lips had Wei Wuxian fisting his hands into the back of Lan Wangji’s silken robes. In the past, Lan Wangji had nearly drawn his sword on Wei Wuxian for just daring to tug on his sleeve. Now Wei Wuxian’s hands were latched onto the expensive silk, wrinkling it in his fists, and Lan Wangji only kissed him harder, the tip of his tongue sweeping into his mouth, smooth and strong against his.

He tasted like the light tea they had with their meal at dinner, clear and warm.

Lan Wangji was kissing him. The thought kept playing on frantic, emphatic repeat in Wei Wuxian’s head. Not just some chaste, gentle touching of lips.

Lan Wangji was kissing Wei Wuxian with his entire fucking *body* and Wei Wuxian was not entirely sure he was going to survive it.

“Wei Ying.” Lan Wangji lifted his lips from Wei Wuxian’s only long enough to breathe out his name before diving back in, then moving to trace a path with his mouth along the arched line of Wei Wuxian’s throat.

Lan Wangji had said Wei Wuxian’s name a thousand times, but none of them had sounded like this. There was a dark, possessive note to it, edged with desperation and almost awe. Wei Wuxian was able to recognize all of those emotions swirling and twisting within himself as well.

The shadowy images from Wei Wuxian’s dream had not prepared him for what it would feel like to have Lan Wangji’s hands gripping his body and his mouth moving over his.

Wei Wuxian could feel his dick swelling and lengthening against the thin fabric of his pants, the friction of the cloth against him made him gasp slightly. His blood couldn't decide where to rush, some of it making him dizzy with the heady rush to his head, and some flooding south with arousal.

Wei Wuxian made a low sound in the back of his throat, moving his legs wider apart to make more space for Lan Wangji between them.

The slight sound seemed to encourage Lan Wangji, who gripped him harder and pressed tighter against him, bringing their bodies flush together. Wei Wuxian was on a sensory overload, his fingers gripping the fluid silk of the back of Lan Wangji’s robes, the soft slide of Lan Wangji’s hair brushing across the back of Wei Wuxian’s hands. The scent of sandalwood. The harsh sounds of Lan Wangji’s breathing, the hot puff of his breath across Wei Wuxian’s cheek.

It was too much. Wei Wuxian could not process it all, his eyes fluttering closed.

Wei Wuxian was not aware of moving, but his back was somehow pressed up against the wall and Lan Wangji’s hand had released his hair to join his other hand in gripping Wei Wuxian’s waist hips and pulling him forward to press harder against Lan Wangji’s hard-muscled thigh.

He would have been mortified by the fact that there was no way that Lan Wangji could miss the painfully hard ridge of Wei Wuxian’s arousal except that he could feel the large, nearly obscene prominence of Lan Wangji’s erection pressing against his hip.

That thought made Wei Wuxian’s mind do a stutter step.

Lan Wangji was not just *kissing* him. Lan Wangji was aroused.

Lan Wangji’s dick was *hard* for him.

The thought of having any knowledge whatsoever about Lan Wangji’s dick was almost too much for Wei Wuxian to handle. One of his hands released its death grip on Lan Wangji’s robes to slide down his back and around his slim waistline towards the front of his robes. His hand had just brushed against the robes covering the outer edge of Lan Wangji’s erection (and holy *shit* was there nothing about this man that was average?) when Lan Wangji gripped his wrist, moving his hand away.

Wei Wuxian let out a soft sound of protest that was immediately swallowed up by Lan Wangji's mouth. Lan Wangji gripped both of Wei Wuxian's hands, pinning them roughly over his head against the wall as he kissed the life out of him.

Wei Wuxian had never known he wanted to be pinned against the wall by Lan Wangji, but he realized that he never wanted to do anything else for the rest of his existence. Without conscious thought, Wei Wuxian's hips flexed, grinding his cock into the hard muscle of Lan Wangji's thigh.

"Oh, fuck," Wei Wuxian shuddered, then did it again, settling into a dirty grind against the pristine robes covering Hanguang Jun's thigh.

He had gotten himself off many times in his life, but having his dick moving against someone *else's* body was an entirely different thing.

Having his dick grinding against *Lan Wangji's* body was…

"Lan Zhan!"

Wei Wuxian felt his entire body tightening with a writhing sort of tension. His eyes shot open and he was met with the sight of Lan Wangji staring down at him, eyes dark with a fierce arousal and… and… Wei Wuxian could not figure out what the other emotion was because suddenly his vision whited out and he was cumming, fully clothed, pressed up against the wall by Lan Wangji

Lan Wangji didn't take his eyes off him the entire time Wei Wuxian shuddered through his climax, his hands gripping Wei Wuxian's wrists so tightly that they were likely to leave bruises.

That thought sent another ripple of arousal through his already wrung-out body, making his cock pulse one more time. Yet another fact he was learning about himself that day, and by the heavy-lidded, burning look directed at him, Lan Wangji was learning it as well.

Wei Wuxian was not sure he would have been able to remain standing if it weren't for the solid support of the wall behind him and Lan Wangji's grip. All he could do for several moments was to stare wide-eyed at Lan Wangji as his breath came in short gasps.

He realized, when he was finally capable of thinking again, that Lan Wangji was still hard against his hip. Lan Wangji had loosened his grip enough that Wei Wuxian was able to easily pull his hand free, reaching down to help Lan Wangji finish. But once again, Lan Wangji stopped his hand.

"Not necessary," he said briskly.

"But you didn't…," Wei Wuxian began, but Lan Wangji cut him off.

"Not necessary. When there is more time."

Wei Wuxian still felt a little bad, but he was not going to touch Lan Wangji without his consent. And Lan Wangji had basically said there was going to be a 'next time', which Wei Wuxian was fully on board with.

Lan Wangji released him, then took a small step away.

Wei Wuxian had to force himself to not take a step forward and reclaim the warmth of Lan Wagnji's body against his.

"There are six left." Lan Wangji stated.

Wei Wuxian wondered if sex somehow killed brain cells, because he had no idea what Lan Wangji was talking about.

"Six what?"

"Six requirements. Wei Ying had laid out seven, but one has already been met."

"Requirements? Wait, Lan Zhan!"

But Lan Wangji was already turning to leave. Unlike his usual pristine appearance, the wrinkles in the back of his robe where Wei Wuxian had gripped him were visible. Wei Wuxian felt oddly pleased at the sign of his mark on Lan Wangji.

"It is time for rest. We will speak again tomorrow. I will inform Brother and Uncle."

"You're going to inform them? Of *this* ?!" Wei Wuxian gestured somewhat wildly, half panicked at himself and Lan Wangji's general state of debauchery.

"About our betrothal arrangement. Yes. Good night, Wei Ying."

Wei Wuxian stood, half slumped against the wall, wondering if he had hallucinated the entire evening or if he had really just become engaged to Lan Wangji.

To be continued...

A/N: For those of you wondering exactly what Lan Wangji has in his head, or that skipped the sexual scene, the 'rules of engagement' are:
1 - Show wwx that he believes wwx is the best.
2 - Show he actually has chosen wwx above all others KNOWINGLY (for reasons that lwj can actually articulate) not just that he didn't get a chance to know anyone else
3 - Show wwx that he believes they are equals.
4 - Get his sect leaders blessing

5 - Show wwx that he desires him, not just tolerates him
6 - Show that lwj knows what being a cultivation partner really would entail, basically that he has actual sexual desire and that the idea of dual cultivation is not horribly off-putting to him.
7 - Kiss someone to show some sort of sexual experience. With 'someone' being Wei Ying, specifically.

Chapter 39: Contingency plans

A/N - Here it is! Not a full week early this time, but at least I got it out before the Thanksgiving weekend here in the US. I will be driving to see fam so I figured if I didn't get it out now, it would end up being late. Another weirdly long chapter that somehow only got half as far in my outline as I had thought, but whatever. Thanks so much to ZazGeek who helped me out when I was spinning my wheels a bit on some parts of this chapter.

Wei Wuxian had been drunk many times in his life, but he had never felt as dizzy and disoriented as he did while leaning against the wall, trying to figure out how to reconnect his body and mind after being pinned against the wall and kissed breathless by Lan Wangji.

Voices from the hallway brought him back to focus as a group of cultivators walked by the room he was in. He wasn't sure how much time had passed, but Wen Yuan would be looking for him in their rooms soon for bedtime. Wei Wuxian grimaced at the sticky feeling inside his trousers, but there was nothing he could do about it at the moment. He straightened his robes as best he could, drew a shaky breath, and headed to his rooms.

He had completely forgotten that Jiang Yanli had taken A-Yuan to give him his bath, so *of course* she was waiting for Wei Wuxian in his room. Her eyes first widened, then narrowed as they focused on the base of his throat. Evidently he had not done a particularly good job of straightening himself up.

"A-Xian," Jian Yanli said carefully, glancing over to where A-Yuan was still in the tub. "Did something… are you alright?"

Wei Wuxian didn't really know *how* he was, but he knew he didn't want his sister to worry.

"Fine! I'm fine I just… uh…" Wei Wuxian didn't really know how to finish his sentence.

"Hm," Jiang Yanli said, looking at him for a moment longer, before giving herself a short nod. "Ok. Let me finish getting A-Yuan to bed. He said that he had to go and say goodnight to the kittens before he took his bath, so we're running a little late. You can take a bath while I do that, and then you and I are going to talk."

Wei Wuxian didn't know if he really wanted to talk about what had just happened, but he also really could use some advice on what the fuck was going on. There was no way he could possibly be engaged to Lan Wangji but… there was a possibility that that was what had just happened. He nodded to his shijie, and together they helped A-Yuan finish his bath and dry off, listening to him describe the kittens in an increasingly sleepy voice before Jiang Yanli took him to put him to sleep.

Wei Wuxian put a heating talisman on the tub to reheat the water, then quickly washed himself, along with his trousers. His emotions were a tangle of arousal, embarrassment, disbelief and at least ten other things. He felt the sting of the bathwater against the abrasions of his throat where Lan Wangji's lips and teeth had been. The twinge of pain definitely brought the 'arousal' portion

of his emotional mess to the forefront, but he ignored it, knowing his sister would be returning soon. He dressed in his sleeping robe then sat down on his bed and began combing out his hair as he waited for his sister to return.

Jiang Yanli gently closed the door to A-Yuan's room, then came to sit next to Wei Wuxian on his bed. She looked over to where Wei Wuxian's trousers were hanging from a towel rack near the brazier by the bath, and eyed them for a moment.

"A-Xian. What happened?"

That was a question that Wei Wuxian himself still had not figured out the answer to, but he decided he should get to the important part first.

"I think… I think I might have somehow tricked Lan Zhan into getting engaged with me."

Jiang Yanli's lips parted in surprise, but then she quickly schooled her expression and reached out to take his hand.

"Hm. Would being engaged to Lan Zhan be a bad thing?" she asked, as though that was in any way a reasonable question.

"Yes! I mean, no! I don't know! Shijie, Lan Zhan is so… so *great* . He's the best! But this isn't how engagements of sect heirs work. This is a mistake, and it's going to get him in trouble and mess everything up!"

Jiang Yanli's expression gentled, and she carefully took the comb from where it lay forgotten in Wei Wuxian's hand and began combing out his hair.

"Don't worry about the sects, or even Lan Wangji right now. I only care about A-Xian, and his happiness. Would being engaged to Lan Wagnji make *you* happy, if everyone else supported it?"

Wei Wuxian closed his eyes. He knew Jiang Yanli was trying to be kind, but the sheer impossibility of the question she asked still cut him like a blade. She set the comb down, and instead ran her fingers through his hair, in the same soothing way she had when he was a child and had come down with the flu before his golden core had been strong enough to fight it off for him.

"XianXian is much too young and innocent to be engaged, much less to have tricked someone into it. Tell your shijie what happened. We will figure it out."

He slid off the bed and sat at her feet, laying his head in her lap as she stroked his hair. He began to talk, stumbling at first, the words tumbling out of him in a rush. He told her about the *Xiangliu* , about the cave they'd hidden in while he was healing after the assassination attempt. He told her about what had happened in the woods the day before, and the conversation they'd had at the inn, and then in the courtyard.

And finally, he told her about what had happened after dinner. He glossed over some of the more physical aspects, but he did tell her about what was said and that Lan Wangji had kissed him.

There was complete silence in the room when he had finished talking, though her hand still rested on his hair. He could feel the tension in her thighs, beneath his cheek and he turned his head to look up at her. Usually, Wei Wuxian was able to read his sister's expression, but for the moment, her face was closed off, and there was a hard glint in her eye that he had never seen before. He had taken care to not describe anything *shameless* that he and Lan Wangji had done, but maybe she had sensed it and was upset by his behavior. Or maybe she realized that Wei Wuxian had trapped someone way above his station into some sort of illicit affair and -

"A-Xian. Whatever you're thinking, please stop. I'm not angry with *you* ." Jiang Yanli rested her hand on the side of his face.

Wei Wuxian wasn't sure about the subtle stress she'd placed on the word 'you', because, really, there was no one else she could be angry with. But his shijie would not lie, so he simply waited to hear what else she would say.

"You are not the one who did any tricking, A-Xian. Lan Wangji was the one who brought it up. And he also was the one who initiated the… kissing."

Jiang Yanli's tone took on the slightest edge, and he looked up to see her gazing down at his throat. He rubbed a hand along it, feeling the twinge as his fingers pressed over the areas where Lan Wangji had marked his flesh. He could feel his face heat with embarrassment, but Jiang Yanli was soothing him again.

"My Xianxian is only three, and Lan Wangji should have spoken with me first before initiating these things. Or at least made his intentions to you more clear, if he feels that YunmengJiang's blessing is no longer required. But you did not trick him, A-Xian. This is what he wanted."

Wei Wuxian tried to get his head around that, but it didn't really fit with everything he'd ever known about Lan Wangji.

"Lan Zhan likes night hunting with me. And he doesn't really like to night hunt with anyone else outside of the Lan sect. But he could barely even tolerate being in the same room with me outside of night hunts ever since we first met! And cultivation partners go way beyond just tolerating someone. It's something totally different!"

Jiang Yanli looked down at him in sympathy as she breathed out a soft laugh. "Yes, A-Xian. I believe Lan Wangji has a much clearer idea about dual cultivation than my XianXian does. He is not the one who is confused on this point."

It suddenly occurred to him that his sister seemed to have been able to infer a lot of what had gone on between him and Lan Wangji by looking at the marks on his skin and the puffiness of his lips. He sat up, scowling.

"That Peacock better not have been trying to do anything like that with you."

Jiang Yanli arched an eyebrow, but there was no denying the soft blush that spread to her cheeks, nor the slightly smug look on her face.

"Zixuan is much more like you than you think. Which is the only reason that I have sympathy for Lan Wangji, despite his poor communication skills."

Wei Wuxian looked at his sister, his mind slowly processing the implications of what she had just said. If Jin Zixuan was like him, then Jiang Yanli had… been the one to initiate… things?

Wei Wuxian was not going to acknowledge this about his sister. She was flawless in all ways and could not *possibly* want to do the things that he and Lan Wangji had done with the *peacock.* No.

Jiang Yanli's amused laughter tinkled through the room, and Wei Wuxian felt himself start to breathe again with the warmth of it.

"Oh, A-Xian. I told you so many times not to put your Lan Wangji on a pedestal. And the same goes for me. Given how Lan Wangji has behaved, there can be no doubt that he is firm in his resolve to court you."

There were so many things that Wei Wuxian could reply to her statement, but she was already continuing with a question that brought him up short.

"Do you consider Lan Wangji to be a man who would toy with the affections of others?"

"No. He would never!" Wei Wuxian was offended by even the mention of the idea.

Jiang Yanli gave a short nod in agreement.

"Mm. I agree. And do you believe he is impulsive or lacks self-control?"

Wei Wuxian knew where she was going with this, but answered her anyway.

"No. Lan Zhan is probably the most ridiculously controlled person I know. Except for tonight, which is why-"

But Jiang Yanli held up a hand to stop him.

"We agree that he would not toy with you. We also agree that he is not a man who is unable to control his actions. Do you think he is a man who is unable to think about the consequences of his actions in advance? Is he unintelligent about the expectations of his sect or the rules that govern them?"

Wei Wuxian didn't bother to answer. Everyone knew how brilliant both Twin Jades of Lan were. There could be no dispute.

"Lan Wangji made a point to feed A-Yuan from his own bowl, in front of a group of influential people including many sect leaders. He left marks on you that will be visible no matter how you tie your robes. A-Xian. He is sure."

Wei Wuxian stared at her, trying to find a flaw in his sister's logic, but unable to do so. He wasn't sure if this was better or worse, though, because even if - for some bizarre reason - Lan Wangji *wanted* to be engaged to him, it didn't mean there wouldn't be terrible fallout for Lan Wangji if he made his disastrous choice known.

She patted his shoulder as she stood.

“It is good that he knows he will need to work harder to show you he is sincere. He will also need to work to get his sect’s blessing. I am sure your Lan Wangji will be most diligent in his endeavors.” Her smile sharpened. “And I will also remind Hanguang-Jun that - just because you are not officially part of the Jiang sect currently - you still have a big sister he will need to consult on such matters.”

“Shijie!” Wei Wuxian absolutely did not want his sister, or - gods forbid - *Jiang Cheng,* hearing about any of the ways Lan Wangji might go about convincing him of some of the things they had discussed.

Jiang Yanli looked at him innocently (though Wei Wuxian knew her well enough to know not to trust her current expression).

“I simply meant in terms of negotiating with his family. We will need to ensure that you are not taken advantage of, nor punished by his sect when it is not their prerogative to do so.”

Wei Wuxian had no reply to that, though he did briefly wonder if Lan Qiren would be able to stand against Jiang Yanli if she really decided to confront him. He suspected the man would lose, and half wanted it to happen just so he could see the look on the Lan Elder’s face when he did.

After his sister left to go to her own chambers, Wei Wuxian put out the lanterns, and forced himself to lay down in bed. It was a long time before sleep finally claimed him.

Morning came far too early, with Wen Yuan burrowing into Wei Wuxian’s bed claiming he was hungry and that Wei Wuxian had overslept. Based on the angle of the light slanting through the windows, though, it was still quite early. They had plenty of time to make breakfast, though they would have missed the first wave of people. Fortunately, the Nie did not keep Lan hours.

Wei Wuxian pulled on his robes and quickly tied his hair up in the messy ponytail he usually kept it in. The marks on his throat from the night before were clearly visible above the collar of his robes. Wei Wuxian pressed his thumb into the darkest one, the slight twinge reminding him of how it came to be there. He wanted to leave them out for all to see, but Jiang Cheng was still in residence and his martial brother’s short temper was not something he wanted to deal with while he was still figuring things out with Lan Wangji. He placed two fingers above the spot and directed a narrow flow of his qi to the broken blood vessels. He was not very good at healing, but a simple scrape and small bruise was easy enough to remove.

He wondered what Lan Wangji was thinking. If he had changed his mind from the night before. If he had regrets. If he wanted to kiss Wei Wuxian again.

Wei Wuxian decided that the best way to find out was to find the man and ask him directly.

When they arrived in the dining hall, Wei Wuxian’s eyes were immediately drawn to where Lan Wangji, seated in the middle of the room, looked as pristine in his flawless white robes and elaborate hairstyle. No one would ever guess by looking at him that he had pinned Wei Wuxian to the wall and kissed the breath out of him the night before. Wei Wuxian felt a heady thrum of possessiveness in knowing that he was the only one to have borne witness to that.

“Xian-gege, let’s *go* ! Before all the steamed buns are gone!” A-Yuan’s voice and insistent tugging on his sleeve brought him back to the current moment. He had been so focused on Lan

Wangji that he hadn't noticed that the man was seated between Nie Mingjue and Jiang Yanli, with Jiang Cheng and Nie Huaisang on either side of them. Based on the icily determined expression on Lan Wangji's face, and the fierce scowl adorning Jiang Cheng's, they appeared to be in some sort of an argument. It did not take a genius to figure out what the likely subject of the discussion was, but he wondered if Lan Wangji had initiated it or Jiang Yanli. Whoever it was, he wished that they had not involved Jiang Cheng. It would only make everything more complicated and contentious.

As Wei Wuxian and A-Yuan made their way through the room, Lan Wangji was the first to notice them, his eyes locking on Wei Wuxian. The annoyed iciness disappeared from his face, and his eyes seemed to almost warm, though there was no discernible change in his expression. The others noticed Lan Wangji's distraction and Wei Wuxian suddenly found himself at the center of 5 sets of eyes.

He was incredibly glad he'd had the foresight to remove the marks from his neck, and briefly considered turning around and walking right back out of the room, but Wen Yuan was already racing over, greeting everyone cheerfully as he looked at what they were eating.

Lan Wangji had clearly finished eating some time ago, as his dishes had already been cleared away. Whatever Lan sect rules Lan Wangji had broken the night before, he had at least waited until he was finished eating before speaking. Lan Wangji's eyes moved to the base of Wei Wuxian's throat where the marks had been removed. A small frown appeared on the Second Jade of Lan's face.

Having greeted everyone, A-Yuan ran off to get some food from one of the tables nearby that still had some of the pork steamed bun that he liked. It was just in time, because Jiang Cheng lashed out at Lan Wangji as soon as the boy was out of earshot.

"There's no fucking way I'm letting him go to Cloud Receses! They beat him with a plank just for *drinking* . I'm not going to see what they come up with for demonic cultivation! If he sets foot on GusuLan territory, he falls under their jurisdiction and they can do whatever the fuck they want with him since he doesn't belong to another sect. They don't need to ask anyone for permission."

Wei Wuxian decided to find out what was going on before he went to get food for himself, and took a seat at the table across from Lan Wangji.

"What do you mean, you'll 'let me'?" Wei Wuxian asked Jiang Cheng, wondering at what point he had decided to become Wei Wuxian's keeper. Though he sort of agreed with the man's point about not going to Cloud Recesses.

Lan Wangji looked at Wei Wuxian as he replied to Jiang Cheng.

"I will make them listen to Wei Ying. I will not let them punish him."

Jiang Cheng looked like he was about to explode, and even Nie Mingjue was looking skeptical, but before either could say anything, Nie Huaisaing spoke.

"Lan Qiren could come here."

Nie Huaisang lifted his fan to cover his face when everyone turned to look at him.

“I mean, I don’t know! I really don’t know. But Wei-xiong going to Cloud Recesses seems… very risky. I think? I don’t know. But if the issue is his safety in GusuLan territory, having the hearing here would solve that. Wouldn’t it?”

The idea of summoning Lan Qiren all the way to the Unclean Realm to see if he’d be willing to overlook Wei Wuxian’s entire... everything seemed like a very bad idea.

“Why would we have Lan Qiren come *here* , or have me go there? Wouldn’t it be a better idea to keep the the two of us as far apart as possible?”

Wei Wuxian was appalled at where this conversation seemed to be heading. Or where it had started. At all of it, in total. When he had told Lan Wangji that part of why they could not be cultivation partners was due to the fact that his sect *hated* him, he had not meant that Lan Wangji should go and confront his entire sect on Wei Wuxian’s behalf!

“Wei Ying said the blessing of my sect elders was important. If Uncle changes his stance, the others will follow. Brother is already supportive,” Lan Wangji said implacably.

“They already decided, Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian replied.

“Uncle did not take time to hear the facts. Making assumptions is forbidden. Judging others harshly is forbidden.”

Wei Wuxian gave a short huff of a laugh. “Lan Zhan. Your uncle isn’t exactly known for changing his mind. He threw a scroll at me for just mentioning the *possibility* of cultivating resentful energy. It was forbidden to show anger, to throw things, and to raise one’s voice but he had no problems doing all of that for just the *mention* of the topic. He’s never going to change his mind.”

Lan Wangji’s lips tightened, though he didn’t disagree. “Then that will be Uncle’s burden to bear. If the sect supports his wrong actions, then that is their choice.”

Wei Wuxian felt a heavy tension descend over the group, and he had a feeling he was missing a key piece of information.

“All the more reason that Wei Wuxian shouldn’t go to Cloud Recesses,” Jiang Cheng said, giving Wei Wuxian a side-eye. “If they’re about to lose their sect heir over this, then I don’t want him anywhere near their territory. The Lan sect has a rule against holding grudges, but I wouldn’t want to test it.”

“What!?” Wei Wuxian stood, nearly falling over backward with the force of his own movement. People turned to stare at them, but Wei Wuxian didn’t care. “Jiang Cheng! What the fuck are you saying? Have they threatened to expel Lan Zhan?” Wei Wuxian turned frantic eyes on Lan Wangji. There had been rumors of the Lan sect being displeased with the Second Jade’s close association with Wei Wuxian during the war, but Wei Wuxian had no idea it had gone this far. “Lan Zhan! You have to tell them it was all a mistake! You can’t let them do this to you! Look, we can tell them that I used wicked tricks on you to-”

“ *Wei Ying* ,” Lan Wangji interrupted, standing so he was looking Wei Wuxian in the eye from across the table. The rest of the room had fallen silent, all eyes on them. “I approached Sect

Leader Nie early this morning. I formally petitioned him to -," he was cut off before he could finish.

"Hanguang-Jun! Sect Leader Nie!" Meng Yao called out as he hurriedly approached them from across the room. Wei Wuxian had not even realized the man had returned from helping Jin Zixuan sort out the mess that his father had made with the Jin sect. "I am so sorry for interrupting but there is an urgent matter that requires your attention in the Discussion Room. If all of you could please follow me."

Nie Huaisang stood, nodding frantically, his fan fluttering rapidly. "Yes. Yes, it would be good to have everyone's input on this. Thank you, Meng Yao, for bringing this matter to our attention immediately."

Wei Wuxian had not taken his eyes of Lan Wangji. What could he have petitioned Nie Mingjue for that had Meng Yao racing across the room to keep it from being stated publicly? The Discussion Room was deep within Nie Mingjue's private wing, and was only used for the most serious of matters. It was heavily warded for privacy and security.

Wei Wuxian forgot about the fact that he had not eaten breakfast as he followed the group out of the public dining hall, a quick glance showing him that Wen Ning had already guided Wen Yuan to a table and would make sure that Wen Yuan made it to class on time.

The door closed behind them with a heavy, muted thump, the warding against eavesdropping cutting off the sound of the thick pieces of wood coming together.

Wei Wuxian looked at Lan Wangji, afraid of what the man might say but knowing that he needed to hear it.

"Lan Zhan. What have you done?"

Lan Wangji looked perfectly serene when he told Wei Wuxian that he had asked permission to join the Nie sect if his own sect elders banished him, and whether the Nie elders would be supportive of his betrothal to Wei Wuxian.

"I assured him that they would," Nie Mingjue said calmly, as though they weren't discussing the absolutely *impossible* notion of the most filial of Lan disciples defecting from his sect.

"Lan Zhan. You… *why* ?"

Lan Wangji did not look upset nor conflicted about the fact that he might face imminent expulsion from the sect he had dedicated his entire life to.

"I believe in the rules and values I was taught. I have spent my life adhering to their letter but also their spirit. If my sect is no longer going to uphold those rules, then I must follow my own path. Adherence to the righteous path is more important than acceptance from others."

Guilt and anguish crashed through Wei Wuxian. This was all his fault. He had tarnished the purest and most admired of all cultivators. He had brought Lan Wangji so low that the man was about to be kicked out of his sect.

It was unthinkable. Untenable.

He could not let this happen.

“Get the fuck out of your own head,” Jiang Cheng bit out, slamming his shoulder into Wei Wuxian’s, nearly sending him stumbling and forcing him to engage his core to steady himself. It worked both physically and mentally, just like his brother knew it would, though Lan Wangji looked like he was about to draw Bichen.

“The Nie sect would be honored to have Hanguang-Jun join us. But it is unlikely to come to that,” Nie Mingjue said as they all took their seats around the large table in the center of the sealed room.

“Indeed,” Meng Yao agreed, smiling in the carefully controlled way that always made Wei Wuxian think that the man had many thoughts inside his head that no one would ever guess the contents of. “GusuLan would not wish to lose their heir. Nor would they wish to earn the enmity of such a powerful potential enemy.”

Wei Wuxian looked from Meng Yao over to Nie Mingjue. “Red Blade Master and Zewu Jun have been friends forever. They wouldn’t make enemies of their sects over something like this!”

Nie Mingjue gave a low chuckle. “I would never view Xichen as my enemy. But his elders… that is a different matter, depending on the actions they took. They have not always felt kindly towards my family’s way of cultivation. However, I don’t think that the Nie is the ‘powerful enemy’ that Meng Yao was referring to.”

Wei Wuxian looked back to Meng Yao, watching the man’s smile curve in the way that Wei Wuxian was pretty sure meant he was losing patience. However, it wasn’t Meng Yao’s patience that snapped.

“Gods, Wei Wuxian! You’re a fucking dumbass. Why do people always persist in saying you’re a genius!” Jiang Cheng snarled. “It’s *you* , Wei Wuxian. *You* are the powerful potential enemy that the Lan needs to fucking look out for. The Wen were a *much* more powerful sect than GusuLan has ever been, and you wiped the floor with them. Only a blind idiot would miss how obsessed you are with Lan Wangji. If they decide to fuck around and find out by punishing or expelling Lan Wangji, I don’t think anyone would expect you to just sit back and let that happen.”

Wei Wuxian felt an instant surge of dark anger flood through him at the thought of *anyone* daring to harm Lan Wangji because of him. If the Lan sect wanted to punish Wei Wuxian, then that was one thing. He had heard the whisperings of the punishment that the Lan elders had discussed for him, had he returned to their sect to face judgement. He would face their infamous discipline whip if he needed to. But if they thought they could inflict a punishment like that on Lan Zhan simply because the man chose to help him during the war, Wei Wuxian would not hesitate to raze Cloud Recesses to the ground. He would -

“A-Xian,” Jiang Yanli’s gentle voice reached him even as he registered her small hand resting on his arm. “It’s alright. No one is hurting Lan Wangji. Everyone is safe.”

Wei Wuxian blinked away the red haze that had filled his vision at the image of Lan Wangji being whipped on his behalf, and saw the rest of the room staring at him. Adrenaline was still

pounding through his system, and he realized that his hand was tightly wrapped around *Chenqing* , his knuckles white from the force of his grip. Nie Huaisang looked like he was about to faint, and even Jiang Cheng was slightly pale, but also angrier than usual.

Nie Mingjue almost seemed amused. “Like I said. I’m not the one the Lan sect needs to worry about.”

Lan Wangji looked… Wei Wuxian was not sure how to describe the expression. But his golden eyes were dark and burning as they locked at Wei Wuxian. It reminded him of the way Lan Wangji had looked at him when he’d pinned Wei Wuxian to the wall the night before and -

“Get a fucking room! What the hell is wrong with you?!” Jiang Cheng’s shout of rage barely registered to Wei Wuxian, since it had been common background noise for most of his life, but it was enough for Lan Wangji to break eye contact, even if it was only to glare at Jiang Cheng once again.

“Ah, yes. Exactly,” Meng Yao said, his smile still in place, but his hands trembled slightly as he placed them elegantly on the table. “As I was going to say, it is better to have the discussion here, with Lan Qiren and Zewu Jun. The elders will defer to whatever decision they make in this case. It is probably best to keep the audience small to prevent any… unfortunate outcomes.”

The anger that had been pulsing through him moments before still simmered close to the surface. *No one* was going to harm or shame Lan Wangji. Of all the elders, Lan Qiren at least cared for his nephews, so Meng Yao was probably correct in his notion that having him alone would be best. But Wei Wuxian still felt that even approaching the topic was a mistake, if it meant that Lan Wangji might need to give up his sect. Everyone just seemed to be going along with the idea and Wei Wuxian wasn’t sure what he could do to stop it from happening. At least Meng Yao had prevented Lan Wangji from publicly stating that he was considering leaving the Lan. Nothing was irreversible.

Yet.

Except that Wei Wuxian knew Lan Wangji well enough to know that he did not use his words lightly. If he said he was going to confront his elders and leave if they still insisted on condemning and banishing Wei Wuxian, then he had given it enough thought to commit to that act. But maybe Wei Wuxian could talk some sense into him.

“Lan Zhan. We should talk about this before you ask your uncle to come,” Wei Wuxian said. “You don’t have to do this.”

Lan Wangji’s jaw tensed in its most stubborn set. Wei Wuxian sighed.

“It will take some time for us to send a message to Cloud Recesses and for both Lan Qiren and Zewu-Jun to arrive, as they are both in the middle of negotiations on the post-war efforts,” Meng Yao said. “In the meantime, I understand that Wei Wuxian has been night hunting for the Nie sect?”

Nie Mingjue gave an affirmative nod, while Jiang Cheng glowered.

“Actually, that reminds me!” Nie Huaisang said. If Wei Wuxian didn’t know him so well, he would have believed that the Nie sect heir was sincere in having his memory triggered. But the

tiny glance towards Meng Yao gave him away. Wei Wuxian wondered what the two of them had cooked up. And why it seemed like it involved him night hunting. “Da ge has had me helping coordinate the requests for help and reports of potential night hunts. There are a few matters that I have not had the manpower to attend to, with all of the post war efforts and Wei Wuxian still recovering. But with the two of you,there should be no issue handling them if you are planning on staying in the Unclean Realm as you wait for your family to arrive.”

Lan Wangji inclined his head in affirmation. Wei Wuxian felt the back of his neck prickle when he remembered Lan Wangji’s words from before.

“I will night hunt with Wei Ying. I will not marry anyone else.”

Wei Wixuan tried to fight down the possessive curl in his belly at the thought of being the one Lan Wangji would night hunt with. He needed to talk Lan Wangji *out* of his crazy plan, not pour oil onto the fire. But the idea of night hunting together hit differently after what had happened between them the night before. At least, it did for Wei Wuxian. Lan Wangji’s face gave nothing away.

“Excellent! Then you can start with the report of a suspected yaoguai in a village about six hours by sword from here. Some of the local cultivators tried to take it on and none of them made it back in one piece. It might give Wei-xiong something to um… take out some of his anger on? It is in a deeply forested area, so it might take some time to find it, but it has been killing villagers and travelers in the area. I will find the request from the local officials when we finish up here.”

Jiang Yanli narrowed her eyes at Nie Huaisang, who looked innocently back at her from behind his fan.

“Six hours by sword is a long journey. A-Xian has been sticking with night-hunts that do not require overnight stays so he can return to be with A-Yuan.”

Wei Wuxian was torn. As much as he wanted to have a challenging night hunt, he hated to leave A-Yuan alone. It would have to happen eventually, but he wasn’t sure the child was ready yet. But depending on what type of monster it was, leaving it unattended could cost more lives.

“Oh!” Nie Huaisang said. “I mentioned to A-Yuan yesterday that many of his classmates live in the disciple dormitory. He asked if he could try sleeping over with one of his friends in their room to see if he liked it. And, if not, I’m sure Wen Ning would be happy to have Wen Yuan sleep over in his rooms. It would be good for him to readjust to Wei Wuxian going on occasional night hunts that take him away from home overnight, now that he is recovered.”

“Not without a chaperone,” Jiang Cheng bit out.

Wei Wuxian spun to face him, not sure if his brother was serious or joking. The angry look on Jiang Cheng’s face made it clear he was serious.

“What? Lan Zhan and I have been night hunting together for years!”

“And you should have had a chaperone then, too, by the looks of it!” Jiang Cheng snapped back.

Wei Wuxian rolled his eyes. “Chaperone to keep us from killing each other, maybe. Lan Zhan hated me back then.”

Lan Wangji bristled. “I did not hate Wei Ying.”

Wei Wuxian felt his neck flush. “Lan Zhan! You can’t just say things like that when I’m not expecting it!”

“Ugh, You’re both gross. What do either of you know about how betrothed people act, anyway? Your whole fucking courtship with each other has been night hunts and sparring since you met!”

Wei Wuxian was not sure his brother was entirely wrong, but the idea that they needed a chaperone was still insulting.

“I’m not going to… to *seduce* Lan Zhan on a night hunt!” Wei Wuxian said in disbelief.

Ok, he might definitely be… *interested* in kissing Lan Wangji again, and maybe returning the favor from the night before, but not in the middle of a night hunt where people could get hurt. Plus, Lan Wangji always drew attention wherever he went. Wei Wuxian might flirt with him when they were together, but he would never actually *do* something out in public that could ruin the man’s reputation.

Meng Yao breathed out something that sounded like ‘*you’re not the one we’re worried about* ’, but Wei Wuxian was pretty sure he heard that wrong.

“A-Xian,” Jiang Yanli said softly. “No one is accusing you or Lan Wangji of anything inappropriate. But there are optics to be considered. Yes, you used to night hunt together all the time, but that was before you were engaged.”

“Are they actually engaged?” Meng Yao asked, his eyebrows raising in surprise. “I thought that they were holding off until they had the blessing of GusuLan. Are they going to announce it before Lan Qiren even arrives to hear them make their case?”

The sound of Jiang Cheng grinding his teeth was the only sound in the room for a moment.

Meng Yao continued. “If an announcement has been made, then I agree that a chaperone might be required. It will make things more contentious for the Lan elders, but it is what it is. If an announcement has *not* been made, then Wei Wuxian is correct. They have been night hunting together for years, and it would be odd to suddenly impose a chaperone on them. It would imply that something improper has occurred.”

Jiang Yanli did not look pleased, and Jiang Cheng looked absolutely livid. But Meng Yao was right and there was nothing to be done about it.

“You could still just do local night hunts. We have plenty of those,” Nie Huaisang offered, though no one seemed to like that answer, either. No matter how stretched resources were at the moment, it was a sect’s job to protect its citizens. At least, it should be.

Wei Wuxian met Lan Wangji’s gaze. In the end, Lan Wangji had the most at stake in this decision.

“Let us speak with A-Yuan first. If he is not ready for Wei Ying to be separated from him for more than a day, then we will need to find another solution for the yaoguai. If he is, then there is no need for a chaperone. We will acquire separate rooms, if an overnight stay is needed.”

Jiang Yanli observed Lan Wangji closely for a moment, then nodded. “Thank you, Hanguang Jun. I trust you will keep in mind our discussion from earlier and treat my brother with the care he deserves.”

Lan Wangji inclined his head in agreement, while Jiang Cheng looked suspiciously between the two of them.

“What discussion?” Jiang Cheng asked sharply.

Jiang Yanli reached over and patted his hand. “Nevermind, A-Cheng. It is handled.”

Wei Wuxian was definitely going to ask Lan Wangji what his sister had spoken with him about, though he had a feeling it had to do with the state of his neck when he’d returned to his rooms the other night. On one hand, he was mortified that Jiang Yanli might very well have had some sort of shovel talk with Lan Wangji. But it felt… good to have someone who cared enough to go toe-to-toe with Lan Wangji for him. Not that he needed it. Lan Wangji was the most honorable person there was, but he was also an incredibly powerful cultivator, and Jiang Yanli was not.

Wei Wuxian would be lying if he didn’t admit that he missed the rush of night hunting with Lan Wangji. And Nie Huaisang wasn’t wrong that Wei Wuxian could use something more serious to fight right then, given he wasn’t going to be able to run his sword through Lan Qiren if the man said shitty things about Lan Wangji. Though if the man tried to raise a hand against Lan Zhan, then that was a different matter entirely.

But it would give him an excuse to get Lan Wangji away from everyone who seemed to be somehow willing to send him on a direct path to getting kicked out of his sect. Lan Wangji was rational. Wei Wuxian would be able to convince him that - whatever this thing was between them - it wasn’t worth Lan Wangji giving up everything he’d worked his whole life to build.

Everything had happened so fast, and they’d clearly both gotten carried away the night before. All Wei Wuxian had to do was keep his hormones in check and have a rational conversation with the Second Jade, and they could fix this mess.

He could totally handle it.

To be continued…

A/N - Next chapter we get to see if wwx can really handle it or not ;)

Chapter 40: Wei Wuxian could not, in fact, handle it

A/N - I think it is hilarious that literally NO ONE believed wwx when he said he could handle it. Thanks to ZazGeek for saving you all from about 12 different tense changes in this chapter, idek what I was doing LOL.

C/w: If you don't like to read about the physical side of attraction, dismount this chapter when Wei Wuxian begins to check Lan Wangji's wounds. Because sometimes, when a man and another man like each other very much… you get the picture. ;-)

Wen Yuan was very excited about the prospect of a sleepover in the younger student dormitory, which turned out to be a good thing because another letter had arrived begging the Nie sect for aid with another three villagers dead.

Nie Huaisang handed them the original request for help along with the one that had arrived that morning. The accounts of the attacks were strange, with some believing it was a ghost, some a yaoguai, and some describing something that could even be human. Wei Wuxian felt a twist of guilt that he had not been well enough to help earlier. If he had, there would be three people alive today that were, instead, being mourned by their loved ones.

Lan Wangji seemed to be able to read something of Wei Wuxian's thoughts in his face as he turned to Nie Huaisang.

"We will leave immediately."

Nie Huaisang did not seem surprised, merely giving a short nod. The case was serious enough that the man didn't even flutter around with his fan like he usually would. Nie Huaisang might like to pretend to be incompetent, but he cared about his people and was all business beneath his layers of rich silk and finely painted fans.

"We will look after A-Yuan while you are gone. If you will be more than two days, send word," Nie Huaisang said. He didn't bother to tell them to call for help if they needed it. It was unlikely that they would encounter anything the two of them couldn't handle, between them. And if they *did* , it would take more than a couple of back-up Nie disciples to come to their aid.

The flight was long, but Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji pushed for speed. The war had already claimed so many lives, and they shared an unspoken need to prevent any more deaths if it was in their power to stop them.

The urgency of the night hunt was at the forefront of Wei Wuxian's mind as they set off, thinking about what type of creature they might be going to encounter based on the clues the request for help had revealed. But as the minutes ticked into hours, Wei Wuxian had already turned over the potential options and examined every piece of available information multiple times. Without more to go on, there wasn't anything more he could do until they got there.

His mind, never idle, immediately shifted to the next intransigent problem: How to prevent Lan Wangji from throwing his reputation and entire *life* away. The wind rushed past them as they flew, making conversation somewhat difficult, but not impossible.

“Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian began, not really sure where to even start.

Lan Wangji did not look over at him, but Wei Wuxian was sure the man had heard him. There was a stillness in his frame as he stood elegantly upon *Bichen* , despite the wind that swirled his white silk robes gracefully around him as he flew rapidly through the air on his gleaming sword. His posture was as perfectly straight as always, his broad shoulders showing his physical strength as much as his sword speed showed his spiritual prowess. The sight made Wei Wuxian’s breath catch in his throat and longing twist in his stomach.

There had never been a man as perfect as Lan Wangji.

But that was all the more reason that Wei Wuxian couldn’t let him go through with his ridiculous plan to throw away everything he’d worked for, everything he’d earned. Wei Wuxian had to stop him before Lan Wangji came to regret his actions, or to regret ever knowing Wei Wuxian.

“You shouldn’t go against your uncle.”

Lan Wangji’s jaw clenched, the only sign he had heard Wei Wuxian’s words. Wei Wuxian wasn’t sure how to convince him to listen to reason. Lan Wangji was known throughout the cultivation world for his calm demeanor, icy control, and analytical reasoning. But Wei Wuxian also knew that Lan Wangji had a stubborn streak a mile wide, and would absolutely dig his pristine heels in if Wei Wuxian fucked this up and didn’t make him see reason.

Even worse, Wei Wuxian could fuck it up and end up hurting Lan Wangji. His mind raced to come up with an argument that he hadn’t already tried to make.

“Lan Zhan. You should take time to think about it before you send a message to your uncle.”

“I have already thought about it. I have already sent the request.”

Well, shit . Wei Wuxian fought down the panic that was twisting up inside his throat. There had to be some way to stop this. Lan Wangji was just caught up in… *whatever* it was that was going on between them, but Wei Wuxian was not going to allow it to ruin the immaculate Second Jade.

“We can… we can send another note, telling him it was a mistake. You just need more time to -”

“No.”

Did Wei Wuxian mention Lan Zhan had a stubborn streak? Yeah. Most people thought butter wouldn’t melt in Lan Wangji’s mouth but the reality was that the man could be an absolute little *shit* when he decided to.

“No?! Lan Zhan! You’re just… Look, after what we went through together in the war, it’s normal to feel some sort of attachment or… or whatever. But that doesn't mean you will feel that way in a year. Or even a month. Just give it some time before doing something crazy that you can’t take back.”

Lan Wangji snapped his head around to look at Wei Wuxian, though he didn't slow his speed.

"I do not take my actions or words lightly."

The intensity in the golden eyes that locked on Wei Wuxian nearly had him stumbling off his sword. There was a steely determination and a heat of not just anger but…

Lan Wangji abruptly shifted on Bichen, directing his sword down to a small copse of trees on the rocky hillside they had been flying over. Wei Wuxian hesitated fractionally before following.

Lan Wangji was already off his sword by the time Wei Wuxian reached the ground.

"You told me once what my elders would seek in a spouse. Is that what Wei Ying wishes for me?"

Wei Wuxian hesitated. Lan Wangji had the same expression he had in battle just before he lured his opponent into making a fatal mistake. Even with the forewarning, Wei Wuxian couldn't see the trap.

"Highly ranked cultivator. Bloodline into sect leadership. Family of means," Lan Wangji stated.

Wei Wuxian gave a slight nod in agreement. Those were definitely some of the top criteria he would expect the Lan elders to require.

"Yeah. That sounds about right."

"So you would have had me accept Wen Chao's offer."

Ah. And there was the trap. Wei Wuxian remembered the conversation they'd had on their way to the body of the *Xiangliu* when he'd teased Lan Wangji about Wen Chao's ridiculous offer. The thought of Wen fucking *Chao* touching even the hem of Lan Wangji's robes made something dark and dangerous boil in Wei Wuxian's stomach.

"No," Wei Wuxian bit out, not even realizing his hand had moved to grip *Chenqing* until he felt the bite of the smooth edge pressing into his palm.

Lan Wangji just arched a perfect eyebrow, his aura almost smug at Wei Wuxian's explosive retort.

"Mn." There was definitely a self-satisfied tone in Lan Wangji's voice which only made Wei Wuxian's skin itch more.

"That… That's *different!* Don't make that face at me, Lan Zhan! Wen Chao is not even worthy to speak with you, much less… much less..." Wei Wuxian couldn't even say the words, and he was ruthlessly glad that Wen Chao had died screaming and in pieces at his feet.

Lan Wangji was watching Wei Wuxian intently. If he was disturbed by the dark wave of power that was surging through Wei Wuxian's body, glowing through his eyes, he gave no sign.

Where others would have run, Lan Wangji took a step closer.

"He would have met the criteria."

Wei Wuxian had to fight to keep from baring his teeth in a snarl at the idea. Lan Wangji seemed to sense it, regardless, and he gave a low hum of pleased consideration. Wei Wuxian's face had never been thick enough to mask his emotions.

"Not Wen Chao. Even if he met the Elders' criteria. I would not take him as a cultivation partner."

"Of course not!" Wei Wuxian said hotly. "But even the elders wouldn't have pushed you to take *him.* "

Lan Wangji was silent for a moment, and Wei Wuxian felt his temper bubbling up again.

"They *what*!? Are they fucking *insane?!* What were they thinking!"

Lan Wangji's eyes flickered calmly down to Wei Wuxian's fingertips, where dark wisps of resentful energy began to curl.

"If it could have staved off the war, some wanted to consider it. Uncle disagreed."

Wei Wuxian would never consider himself an admirer of Lan Qiren, but he felt a flare of affection for the man in the current moment.

"Then you agree that the views of the elders were not correct regarding Wen Chao as a suitable partner."

This time, Wei Wuxian saw the trap Lan Wangji was setting. He got the point Lan Wangji wanted to make, but that didn't mean there wasn't a counterpoint to be made as well.

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean they are wrong about *me* ."

Lan Wangji hummed skeptically. "But their decision should not be taken as infallible. If the elders are wrong, and I am wrong, then who does Wei Ying say is worthy?"

The question stopped Wei Wuxian cold. He had told himself, days ago, weeks ago, that he would be supportive of Lan Wangji's choice, as long as they were worthy.

But now he knew what it was like to kiss Lan Wangji. To have Lan Wangji's body pressed hard against his, to feel those large, elegant hands grip his wrists and pin him to the wall. The thought of those hands on anyone else made Wei Wuxian's vision go red. He drew a breath. Lan Wangji was asking a fair question.

He briefly considered saying MianMian, but Lan Wangji had already said he was not interested in her. She didn't have the credentials the Lan elders would likely expect, either. Who were the Lan considering? Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan were already betrothed. Nie Huaisang was the sect heir just like Lan Wangji, and couldn't marry out. Jiang Cheng had no other blood relatives. There were minor sects who had cultivators who would meet the criteria, possibly, but they were not on Lan Wangji's level on the cultivation level and wouldn't really balance it out by bringing in political or financial ties. But still...

"Ah, Lan Zhan! No one could ever be worthy. Who could match Hanguang-Jun!" Wei Wuxian laughed, though he knew Lan Wangji saw right through it. "But almost anyone is better than

me."

The final words tasted like ash on his tongue. It didn't make them untrue.

"No," Lan Wangji said firmly. "No one is better than Wei Ying."

Wei Wuxian felt his pulse jump. There was a possessive piece of him, deep inside, that revelled in the words, untrue as they might be.

"I'm not the heir to any sect, Lan Zhan. Fuck, I don't even belong to a sect at all! I barely have enough money to pay for a night at an inn when I travel."

"Wei Ying is not an heir," Lan Wangji acknowledged. "But you stood against the entire Wen sect and won. No sect heir or even sect leader could do the same."

"I used heretical means to do that, Lan Zhan. 'Crafty tricks', they called it. Your sect condemned me for it."

"Not tricks. And learning them was not your choice. The elders were wrong. Regardless, it does not change that Wei Ying is more powerful than any sect. Sect alliances are made for power or wealth. That is their purpose. Wei Ying is *more* worthy, not less. Ask Nie Mingjue."

There was a slight edge to the last part of what Lan Wangji said, as though he was not happy about it.

Wei Wuxian blinked. Lan Wangji wasn't… *wrong* … but his mind flinched away from thinking of himself in that way.

"A single person is not a sect," Wei Wuxian said. It was a weak argument, though, and he knew it.

Lan Wangji's eyes bore into him. "Even more impressive, then, that you defeated the Wen."

Wei Wuxian shifted, uncomfortable with any sort of praise for his actions that had led to the deaths of so many, even if most of them were his enemy.

"A weapon is not the same as a spouse, even if that weapon is powerful." The words had barely left Wei Wuxian's lips when he found himself slammed against the trunk of the nearest tree, Lan Wangji's hands gripping painfully tight around his shoulders practically lifting him from the ground.

"Wei Ying is *not* a weapon!"

Wei Wuxian had said many things that had pissed off the illustrious Second Jade in the past. When he had been in Cloud Recesses as a youth, it had been Wei Wuxian's favorite hobby. But he realized had never managed to truly enrage Lan Wangji with anything he had said until this moment.

"Wei Ying is the son of a disciple of Baoshan Sanren, and was the head disciple of Lotus Pier. You fought the *Xiangliu* alone to save people no one else cared about. You warned the sects

about the Wen at risk to himself. You are the father of an orphaned child who loves you. Wei Ying is *good*. Wei Ying is *not a weapon*!"

Lan Wangji's voice had started off low, but built to a volume that was as close to a shout as Wei Wuxian had ever heard the man use outside of battle. His grip tightened further on Wei Wuxian, his voice dropping in pitch and volume, but somehow raising in intensity.

"Wei Ying is the best. It can only be Wei YIng."

Wei Wuxian's lips were parted in shock, unable to formulate any sort of response to the angry barrage of words from the usually silent man. The way Lan Wangji said the last words triggered a memory from the night before they had left, the first time Lan Wangji had kissed him.

"Wei Ying says I deserve the best?"

"It is forbidden to hate, but sometimes I hate the Jiang for what they did to you."

Abruptly, Lan Wangji released him and unsheathed Bichen, leaving Wei Wuxian reeling both physically and mentally. For one insane moment, Wei Wuxian wondered if Lan Wangji was angry enough to actually attack him. Instead, Lan Wangji mounted his sword, turning towards their original direction of travel.

"We must hurry if we're to reach the village before nightfall."

Wei Wuxian stumbled, his body pulsing with adrenaline and shock. He followed Lan Wangji the rest of the way in silence, his mind trying to make sense of the things Lan Wangji had said to him.

He hoped the creature would be easy to defeat, or at least straight-forward. He was not sure his brain would be up to figuring out much beyond letting him know where to swing his sword.

The creature was not straight-forward.

They arrived at the village just before dusk, and spent the next two hours speaking to anyone who had any information about it. The village elders had prepared a meal for them, and invited all the townspeople who had any information on the matter to come. Being outside of Cloud Recesses, there were no rules about speaking while eating, and Wei Wuxian asked many follow-up questions while Lan Wangji listened silently by his side. The stories conflicted in their description of what the creature looked like, what its powers were, and how it killed its victims. Some of the bodies were bruised and broken, while others looked untouched by any physical attack at all. Two of the victims were missing entirely.

The location of the attacks varied as well, with some occurring near the village proper, but others occurring on the roads leading into the area. When the meal had finished, Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian walked outside to the street with two of the village elders to discuss where to begin their hunt. Wei Wuxian grabbed a stick and drew the locations out in the dirt on the ground as he tried to get a feel for what was happening.

"They are all in range of the dense part of the forest we flew over on our way here," he said, looking up from his drawing.

Lan Wangji nodded, then bowed politely to the elders and turned, walking in that direction without another word.

“We’ll just go and see what we can find,” Wei Wuxian said hurriedly to the village elder who had sent the request for aid. The man looked concerned, as though he had been expecting more than just two people to arrive. “Don’t worry! Hanguang-Jun can handle whatever it is. We’ll take care of it for you.”

The man didn’t look particularly appeased as he stroked his beard. “If you’re not back in two days, we will send a second message for help.”

Wei Wuxian didn’t bother to tell him that---if whatever was in that forest was able to take him and Lan Wangji out---the village was pretty much fucked. He smiled and thanked the elders, then hurried after Lan Wangji.

The night was cloudy, and the moon was in the waning quarter phase. They would not be able to rely much on sight as they hunted. They walked deeper into the forest for almost an hour, the sounds of birds and other animals fading away to an unnatural silence. The feeling of a resentful presence of some sort grew stronger.

Whatever was here, it was definitely not human.

“Lan Zhan, it’s close,” Wei Wuxian said, sensing a spike of resentful energy from their left.

Lan Wangji drew *Bichen* , giving a short nod. Whether he was sensing the same thing or simply trusting Wei Wuxian was unclear.

There was a low, growling sound, and then something came barreling out of the bushes near where Lan Wangji had been standing, teeth and claws and glowing eyes. Wei Wuxian was more than a little relieved it wasn’t a dog, but it looked more like it had been a badger before it had been transformed into the resentful creature that was attacking them. *Bichen* slashed through it before Wei Wuxian even had to think about lifting *Suibian.*

It died quickly, making Wei Wuxian frown.

“This can’t be what we’re hunting. Even a low level cultivator could have handled this,” Wei Wuxian said, half to himself and half to Lan Wangji. The feel of a strong resentful energy in the area wasn’t fading upon the creature’s death.

“Mn,” Lan Wangji agreed. He had not resheath *Bichen* , and - instead - was standing still, looking off into the trees. “It is still too quiet.”

Wei Wuxian nodded. The heavy silence that shrouded this part of the forest was still hanging over them.

“I can still feel the resentful energy. Killing the badger didn’t make much of a dent in it.”

The next attack was from a fierce corpse. Followed by a corrupted minor tree spirit.

“Whatever is here is attracting other resentful creatures. Or making them,” Wei Wuxian postulated as he caught his breath.

Lan Wangji was too busy killing yet another minor beast to reply, his sword flowing in a precise, graceful arc that made the motion look beautiful, instead of ruthlessly deadly as it truly was. Wei Wuxian would never tire of watching the Second Jade of Lan fight, his body one with his sword, moving fluidly in the moonlight. It stirred a hunger in him that he knew was dangerous for both of them.

Lan Wangji looked up, and Wei Wuxian was not able to turn away fast enough to avoid being caught staring. Some emotion must have been on his face, because Lan Wangji stilled, his gaze intensifying as the moment pulled taut.

The sound of a twig snapping broke the moment, and they both turned to face whatever was approaching next.

It felt good to night hunt with Lan Wangji by his side again. Wei Wuxian was not modest about his own night hunting prowess, but it was nice to have another set of eyes, and another set of very capable hands when dealing with something unknown that wanted to rip you to shreds.

The resentful energy seemed to be shifting, concentrating.

“Whatever this thing is, I think we’ve gotten its attention,” Wei Wuxian said, feeling a slow prickling starting up his spine. The seal had been relatively dormant in his pouch up until that moment, but now it began to hum.

Wei Wuxian closed his eyes, concentrating on the energy that was drawing nearer. It was nowhere near as powerful as the Burial Mounds, but---if it belonged to a single creature---it was still impressive. But more importantly, it was focused.

Feelings that were almost words but not quite flickered through Wei Wuxian’s mind, emanating from the creature, along with a distorted image of what almost looked like Lan Wangji, glowing much brighter than he actually currently was in the darkness of the night, and another of himself, a mix of light and dark energies, not nearly as pure.

Hunger

Glowing power

Spiritual man

Wei Wuxian could feel the moment the creature set its sights firmly on Lan Wangji. Some creatures were able to absorb the spiritual power of their victims, and the more powerful and spiritually pure the victim was, the closer the creature would become to ascending and potentially becoming immortal.

“Lan Zhan, it’s targeting you,” Wei Wuxian said, readying *Suibian.*

Before Lan Wangji had a chance to respond, the creature was charging at them, surging through the trees in a direct path towards Lan Wangji. It moved so quickly that Wei Wuxian wasn’t exactly sure what it was, but it seemed to have both curled horns like a ram and talons like an eagle, though the face looked almost human. It moved with strength and speed, standing, a full head taller than them with heavily muscled shoulders and flanks.

It was powerful.

Lan Wangji leapt out of the way, *Bichen* arcing through the air but missing its target as the beast circled around. Its eyes glowed red, latched on Lan Wangji.

Wei Wuxian launched himself directly at the beast with no other plan than to try to shift its focus onto himself

"*Wei Ying* !"

He ignored Lan Wangji's shout as the creature caught the edge of *Suibian* with its horns, blocking the downward strike. Wei Wuxian barely had time to twist out of the way before a taloned claw sliced through the air where he had been.

Bichen flew through the air, but the creature moved back just in time to have the blade pass harmlessly by its neck.

The red eyes of the monster were locked back on Lan Wangji, a hungry look in them.

Wei Wuxian threw a firefly talisman to try to distract it as he circled around to the creature's back, forcing it to split its focus. The creature only had eyes for Lan Wangji.

"Lan Zhan. Even the monsters think you're the best!"

Wei Wuxian attacked again, focusing his spiritual energy into speed over force, trying to at least land a blow so he could see what they were up against, but the creature moved too quickly. Lan Wangji fared no better.

The beast continued to watch Lan Wangji hungrily, but Wei Wuxian didn't let up on his attacks long enough for it to do more than circle and wait for an opening. The close range of the combat and its single-minded focus on Lan Wangji meant that the man was unable to use his guqin, but it wasn't clear how effective it would have been in either case. At least the creature wasn't used to its battles dragging on beyond the first attack, though, because its movements quickly became repetitive.

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji said, and Wei Wuxian knew the man had been tracking the same thing.

Wei Wuxian grinned.

And then they were both in motion. Lan Wangji sent *Bichen* directly towards the creature's heart, while Wei Wuxian moved as though he was attacking from the back. Just like before, the creature leapt up and to its left, one talon raised to strike. But instead of following through on his attack, Wei Wuxian had launched himself up, coming down at the creature from above. It hadn't predicted this, and *Suibian* made contact, slicing a deep gash along the creature's shoulder and arm.

The creature shrieked, an unearthly sound that seemed to echo in the dark forest surrounding them.

Wei Wuxian was relieved to see the black blood that dripped from its body, hissing as it hit the ground. If they could make it bleed, it was killable. And they had been the ones to draw first

blood in this fight.

“Mm,” Lan Wangji made a low sound of approval that resonated deep within Wei Wuxian’s bones.

They used the same strategy, somehow being able to read each other’s intentions without needing to speak them aloud. The next blood was drawn by *Bichen* as the creature once again misjudged where to move. But the creature was learning, because even as Lan Wangji’s blade cut into its flesh, it reached out and slashed him across his chest. In the darkness, the blood looked black as it seeped through the gashes in the white, silk robes.

“Lan Zhan!” Wei Wuxian shouted, panic seizing him. There was a decent chance that the talons were poisonous, or at least contaminated with resentful energy.

Lan Wangji was still on his feet, but he was moving slightly slower, and Wei Wuxian was done playing.

The only demon allowed to touch Lan Wangji’s body was Wei Wuxian.

With the scent of Lan Wangji’s blood in the air, the creature seemed to be almost frenzied to reach him. It pulled its claws to its face, first sniffing the licking the blood from them as it stared at Lan Wangji with fevered intensity. Wei Wuxian used the distraction to move in closer, slowing its attack down by casting his binding talisman on its dominant arm. The creature was physically much stronger than him, so it wouldn’t stop it, but it would at least slow it down. The creature screamed in rage as it felt the cord pull, thwarting its attack. It twisted around with preternatural speed, catching Wei Wuxian off guard and ramming him with the flat, front shield of its horns, directly over where the arrow had pierced him during the war. Wei Wuxian flinched at the instant of impact, wondering how the creature knew his weakest spot. He barely remembered to send a flood of qi through his body to shield him as he was sent flying backwards. He smashed through several thick branches, snapping them like twigs, before his back connected hard with the trunk of a large tree, knocking the wind out of him. His ribs would have been kindling if he hadn’t been able to reinforce them at the last moment, but---even so---he wondered if all the cracking he heard had been only the trees.

He’d assess himself later, once the battle was over and the adrenaline rush had slowed. He couldn’t afford to be taken out and leave Lan Wangji alone to battle the monster.

But the creature had made the critical mistake of taking its eyes of Lan Wangji, and that one mistake was all he needed. Wei Wuxian fought the dark speckles in his eyes as he watched Lan Wangji shoot forward, thrusting *Bichen* cleanly through the creature’s back to pierce its heart.

It was dead before it hit the ground.

“Wei Ying!” Lan Wangji said, rushing over to where Wei Wuxian was forcing air back into his lungs.

The cool, smooth feel of Lan Wangji’s qi was flowing into his body the instant Lan Wangji’s skin made contact with his.

“Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian gasped, gripping the man’s wrist and pulling it away. As much as he loved the feel of Lan Wangji’s qi, he wanted him to use it on himself first. “I’m fine. You’re the

one who is bleeding. We need to look at your wounds. The talons might have been poisoned."

Lan Wangji did not look like he believed Wei Wuxian about his lack of injuries, but he allowed Wei Wuxian to pull him down to sit beside him. The clouds had thinned somewhat, allowing the moonlight to filter through the trees to where they were sitting together on the forest floor.

"We need to take your robes off so I can check the wounds," Wei Wuxian said, his eyes locked at the bloody gashes that the creature had slashed in Lan Wangji's chest. It wasn't as though he doubted Lan Wangji's ability to detect poison in his system, but even regular dirt and debris could be problematic. A cultivator with a core as strong as Lan Wangji's would heal quickly, and any dirt or shreds of fabric could become embedded in the healing wound, requiring it to be cut out later.

"I have water and bandages in my pouch," Wei Wuxian said. He actually had a whole fucking medical kit, because Wen Qing didn't trust him to go on a night hunt like this and not get himself injured. The joke was on her, because it was Lan Wangji who was currently bleeding.

The thought made panic twist in his stomach, but he fought it down. He needed to stay calm and ensure Lan Wangji was ok, since he, himself, was uninjured. Wei Wuxian refused to count the extensive bruising he knew would be purpling his back from his impact with the tree, or the imprint the creature's horns had left on his chest over the ribs that were not quite fully healed. Nothing was bleeding except Lan Wangji's chest, which needed to take priority.

As though reading his mind, Lan Wangji spoke looking firmly down at Wei Wuxian.

"Mn. We also need to check Wei Ying."

Wei Wuxian nearly dropped his pouch as Lan Wangji's hands moved to undo the white ties on his own robes as he spoke the words. Wei Wuxian had been in many night hunts that ended with cultivators needing to tend to the wounds of others. It was a hazard of the job. But somehow, watching Lan Wangji slip his outer robe from his shoulders and fold it neatly before setting it carefully aside as though they weren't already ruined, had the adrenaline from the battle shifting and coiling lower in Wei Wuxian's belly.

When Lan Wangji's hands dropped to begin removing his second layer, Wei Wuxian had to force himself to look away. Lan Wangji might be poisoned, and it was *not* the time to be feeling distracted at the thought of him disrobing. The soft rustle of fabric made it hard to think about anything else, though, so Wei Wuxian instead examined the body of the creature that had attacked them as he gathered his medical supplies. Its flesh had faded into dark mist, leaving behind the skeletal remains of what looked to have been a ram, before it had been transformed into whatever it was ascending to. The resentful energy in the area overall was significantly decreased, but they would have to purify it before returning to the Unclean Realm to ensure it didn't continue to attract other resentful creatures and spirits.

"The wound is not poisoned," Lan Wangji said, bringing Wei Wuxian's attention back to the present moment.

Wei Wuxian turned and felt his breath freeze in his lungs.

Lan Wangji was shirtless, wearing only his shoes and pants, sitting in a perfect lotus position, his back straight. His flawless skin glowed in the pale moonlight, marred only by three deep, dark

gashes across the left side of his chest. His eyes were closed as he assessed his internal condition, his chest rising and falling in slow, meditative breaths.

Wei Wuxian forced any… distracting… thoughts aside and moved closer, kneeling in front of Lan Wangji to examine the wounds. The light was too poor to see very much, and they would need to conserve their spiritual energy to get back to the inn. He wouldn't be able to see every speck of dirt or fabric, but most of it would be easily washed out under a steady stream of water from his flask.

"I'm going to rinse the wounds," Wei Wuxian said, his voice sounding oddly rough to his own ears.

Lan Wangji made no reply, remaining perfectly still as Wei Wuxian poured the water to rinse the wounds. He used a clean bandage to gently wipe them to remove any hidden bits of debris that might be embedded. Lan Wangji did not flinch nor react at all, sitting as though made of the Jade he was named after. His body's only response was the pebbling of his flat nipples as the cool water flooded his skin in the night air. Wei Wuxian's attention snagged on them for a moment, wondering how they would feel against the flat of his tongue, but he forced himself again to continue with the task at hand.

He used a dry bandage to catch most of the water so it wouldn't soak Lan Wangji's pants, then---when he was satisfied the wound was sufficiently clean---he used another to gently dry the skin. Lan Wangji's lips parted slightly, but his eyes remained closed. As Wei Wuxian moved the soft, dry cloth over the skin, he felt a nearly uncontrollable urge to brush his thumb over one of the hardened nipples, and had to sink his teeth into his bottom lip to avoid following through on the thought.

With the wounds clean, he refocused his attention on the gashes. He could sense traces of resentful energy coming from the scratches, something that the water could not wash away. If it had reached Lan Wangji's meridians, it could be problematic.

"They are contaminated with resentful energy," Wei Wuxian said, tracing a fingertip just above one of the marks, allowing some of his own spiritual energy to flow into Lan Wangji's body to trace how far the energy had penetrated his system.

Lan Wangji made a muted, low sound in his throat, and Wei Wuxian looked up to find Lan Wangji's eyes open and locked on his face, blazing with a heat that Wei Wuxian recognized. Wei Wuxian's hand froze, along with his breathing. He started to pull his hand away, but Lan Wangji's wrapped around his wrist, holding it in place with a vice-like grip.

"Don't stop. It feels warm and… good. Like Wei Ying."

It took Wei Wuxian a moment to realize that Lan Wangji was talking about how his qi felt to Lan Wangji. Wei Wuxian had assumed that his own wildly chaotic energy would feel annoying or disturbing to someone as controlled and still as Lan Wangji. But judging by the way Lan Wanghi's eyes had darkened, and the rapid breaths coming from his parted lips, that was... not the case.

The thought that the feel of his qi made Lan Wangji aroused sent a flare of possessiveness through Wei Wuxian's core. He wanted nothing more than to splay his hands across the man's

bare chest and let everything he had flood into Lan Wangji's body, but they needed to deal with the resentful energy the creature had poisoned him with, first.

"Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian's mouth felt dry. He licked his lips, feeling a shiver run through him as Lan Wangji's eyes dropped to track the motion. "I can… I need to pull the resentful energy out. We should… we need to keep it from spreading further into your system."

Lan Wangji didn't say anything, but he didn't disagree. Keeping his eyes locked on Wei Wuxian's, he loosened his grip on Wei Wuxian's wrist. Wei Wuxian somehow wished he hadn't. But still, the thought of the creature *daring* to touch Lan Wangji with its contaminated energy made a coil of anger snarl through his body.

Wei Wuxian forced himself to focus, tracing his finger along the wound, calling to the resentful energy that was still at the surface and drawing it out. He could feel a small amount deeper in Lan Wangji's system, but it wasn't enough to cause him serious damage. His core would be able to easily purge it before they traveled back home. Goosebumps rippled along Lan Wangji's skin along the path Wei Wuxian's fingers traced across his chest. The sight caused Wei Wuxian's lower belly to clench.

The lines of Lan Wangji's body were etched in black and white, ethereal in the dim moonlight. The man was holding himself so utterly still, his body and face so perfectly formed, it was as though he was a perfect statue, carved of stone through the artistic hand of a god rather than a man of flesh and bone.

"You're beautiful." The words left Wei Wuxian's mouth before he could hold them back.

He felt embarrassment flood his neck, and hoped it wasn't visible in the darkness. Lan Wangji didn't seem to mind, as he slid one of his hands along the nape of Wei Wuxian's neck before threading his fingers into the back of Wei Wuxian's hair and pulled him into a filthy, searing kiss.

"Wei Ying is beautiful," Lan Wangji breathed the words against his lips before pulling him down into another open-mouthed kiss.

Wei Wuxian started to pull back to disagree, but Lan Wangji's other hand had found his lower back, pulling him forward. Without breaking the kiss, he straddled Lan wangji's lap and -

Oh.

Wei Wuxian rocked his hips forward, feeling the rock-hard length of Lan Wangji's erection press against him. Lan Wangji's arm slid tightly around Wei Wuxian's lower back, pressing their bodies tightly together.

Oh, fuck, that feels…

Wei Wuxian pulled back enough to be able to look at Lan Wangji, letting his eyes drift down to the man's lap, where---despite the poor lighting---he could see the erection that was tenting the white silk of his pants obscenely, straining the fabric. The sight of Lan Wangji's obvious desire for him made Wei Wuxian want to do several things all at once, to tear the remaining fabric from Lan Wangji's body, to close his mouth over the tented silk and see what it would taste like. But doing either of those meant temporarily removing himself from Lan Wangji's grip, and he wasn't

ready to do that. Instead, he slid one of his hands between them, his fingers sliding over the thin layer of silk of Lan Wangji's trousers before wrapping around the thick girth of his cock.

The sound Lan Wangji made seemed to vibrate through Wei Wuxian's entire being, despite how quiet it was. Wei Wuxian's brain was incapable of thought but he had no doubt that anything that was so lustful, so pleasurable, must be against at least twenty different Lan rules. Wei Wuxian would personally obliterate those rules from the stone wall if he ever was allowed back inside Cloud Recesses. Lan Wangji should always sound and look like this, with his eyes closed and his head tipped back in ecstasy, causing the sharp delineation of his Adam's apple and the tendons in his neck to catch on the moonlight.

"Oh, my god, Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian wasn't able to finish whatever he might have been going to say because Lan Wangji's teeth had nipped at his lower lip, effectively shutting Wei Wuxian's usually hyperactive brain down entirely.

Wei Wuxian leaned in, the heat of battle that had been flooding through his veins flashing over into a different sort of heat. The broken off sound that emerged from Lan Wangji's throat indicated he was in a similar state.

Wei Wuxian shifted his hips, feeling his own erection rapidly filling out as he rocked against Lan Wangji's. He pushed Lan Wangji onto his back, loving the feel of Lan Wangji's hands as they slid along the arch of his back before settling to grip tightly around his hips.

This time, Wei Wuxian didn't hold back as he placed his palms on the hard, smooth flesh of Lan Wangji's chest and poured his spiritual energy into him, barely able to focus enough to ensure he avoided touching the wounds directly.

"*Wei Ying*!"

Wei Wuxian could feel Lan Wangji's cock surge against his own, hardening even further, and felt the full body shudder that went through Lan Wangji as he continued to pour his qi into him. Lan Wangji's large hands slid down from his hips to grip his ass. Wei Wuxian groaned at the feel of the strong hands kneading harshly into his flesh, then leaned down to lick his way between Lan Wangji's parted lips. He let his thumb rub against one of the tight, hardened nipples that had distracted him earlier, gratified to elicit another low sound from deep in Lan Wangji's chest.

Lan Wangji responded by thrusting up harder against him, the unbearably hard ridge of his dick sliding against Wei Wuxian's through the fabric of their pants and Wei Wuxian's annoying robes. He desperately wished he could remove the stupid fucking fabric that was separating them, but he couldn't stop his body from moving against Lan Wangji's long enough to actually manage it.

Lan Wangji shifted his grip on Wei Wuxian's ass, and---instead of kneading it---he lifted Wei Wuxian up, settling him higher up on Lan Wangji's stomach, causing Wei Wuxian to clench his teeth in frustration as the delicious friction was interrupted. But before he could complain, Lan Wangji settled one hand on either side of his ass, spreading his cheeks as he thrust up, his dick now sliding into the cleft in Wei Wuxian's ass. The motion shoved Wei Wuxian's erection back and forth over the hard plane of Lan Wangji's abs in a way that was almost as good as it had been before. Maybe even better, because now their bodies were fully flush together and Lan Wangji was sucking and biting a path down Wei Wuxian's throat.

“Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian gasped out as Lan Wangji snapped his hips up faster and harsher.

Wei Wuxian had seen enough of Nie Huaisang’s ‘literature’ to know exactly what Lan Wangji was going for. It wasn’t something he had ever given much thought to wanting, but holy fuck did he want it now. He wanted all of it. Lan Wangji’s tongue in him, his qi in him, his dick in him.

“Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian chanted, grinding down hard against the solid plane of muscle beneath him, wanting to lick it, to bite it---to never have to do anything but this for the rest of his life.

Lan Wangji surged up, his mouth crashing into Wei Wuxian’s in a biting kiss that left the taste of iron in both their mouths. Lan Wangji’s qi punched into Wei Wuxian’s lower dantian, cool and smooth and powerful.

Wei Wuxian’s orgasm hit him without warning, ripping through his body and whiting out his vision in a surge of pleasure so intense he wondered if his core would actually incinerate him. He was vaguely aware of collapsing on Lan Wangji’s chest, but couldn’t do more than shiver and try to get his lungs to work as he felt Lan Wangji continue to thrust against his ass for a few more moments before shuddering beneath him in endless waves.

He slowly became aware of a large hand stroking his hair, the sound of Lan Wangji’s heartbeat steady and sure beneath his ear. He could feel dampness in the front of his robes as well as his back. He only hoped the robes were dark enough that anyone who noticed it would mistake their spend for blood.

“Lan Zhan?” Wei Wuxian asked, his words sounding slurred to his own ears.

“Mn. I am here,” Lan Wangji said, his voice deep and hoarse. “When you are ready, we will return to the village. I will check your wounds there.”

Wei Wuxian felt his lips curve into a slow smirk against the bare skin of Lan Wangji’s chest, until he realized that Lan Wangji would actually likely be somewhat unhappy by the degree of bruising he found beneath Wei Wuxian’s robes.

The memory of the promise they had made to stay in separate rooms came back to him, and he found himself cursing overprotective siblings who couldn’t mind their own fucking business. The larger issue, though, was Lan Wangji’s sect. Wei Wuxian still didn’t want Lan Wangji to have to give up his birthright and reputation for him, but he also wasn’t sure he would be able to walk away from Lan Wangji after what had just happened.

“I will speak with Uncle. I will make him understand,” Lan Wangji said, his voice implacable in the quiet of the forest around him.

Wei Wuxian wondered which of them Lan Wangji was trying to convince with his statement.

To be continued...

Chapter 41: First Impressions

A/N - ok, so I've gotten a lot of DMs that my summary was sort of… not giving people the right impression for the fic so I swapped it out with just a few lines from the prev chapter. Hopefully this is better?? Ugh, summaries are very hard for me LOL. Thanks to ZazGeek for beta'ing this!

The moon had reached its zenith over the forest by the time Wei Wuxian had managed to successfully regain control of his limbs after….

After.

He was carefully not thinking about the stickiness in the front of his trousers, nor the fact that Lan Wangji was in the same situation. His brain was capable of processing many complex and seemingly impossible things, but the fact that he and Lan Wangji had just gotten off with each other in the middle of a night hunt was not one of them.

Lan Wangji pulled a set of clean robes out from his pouch, setting them on a rock away from the bloody ruins of his former robes. He stood and pulled the inner robe on, the muscles across his broad back flexing with the motion, the silvery moonlight casting shadows over the contours. Wei Wuxian realized he had stopped breathing and looked away. His eyes landed on the remains of the creature, and he forced himself to focus on the work they still had to finish up.

The thickest of the demon's resentful energy had dissipated, but it wasn't gone entirely. There could be other things that had been drawn to the area by the demon's heavy aura.

Wei Wuxian suppressed a wince as he stood, his ribs and back aching.

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji said, his voice concerned.

Evidently Wei Wuxian hadn't suppressed the wince as much as he'd thought.

"It's fine, Lan Zhan! We need to clear the area. I'm going to draw any remaining spirits here while you cleanse the resentful energy that the demon left behind."

"Wei Ying should rest. I will do it."

"You're the one who's bleeding. It's fine. I've fought with way worse injuries than a little bruise. We took care of the main danger."

Lan Wangji radiated disagreement, but Wei Wuxian was already drawing the talisman, and had activated it before Lan Wangji had even finished dressing. The smooth, resonant tones of Cleansing reverberated through the night air as Lan Wangji began to play.

Wei Wuxian had heard Lan Wangji play many times before, and had always found the sound both beautiful and powerful, like the man who played it. Now, however, the heady feel of the music laden with Lan Wangji's qi washed over his skin, making the fine hairs on the back of his arms stand on end as the sound filled the air and pressed in on him. He bit his lip, and his eyes

slid half closed, and he nearly swayed at the pleasure the feel of Lan Wangji's qi evoked. If he had been receptive to it in the past, their recent activities had increased that tenfold.

Before he could think about what that meant, much less be embarrassed about it, he sensed the approach of resentful energy. It was a minor spirit, which Lan Wangji handled by smoothly shifting into Rest before Wei Wuxian needed to do anything at all.

Feeling the effects of Lan Wangji's qi moving through him, Wei Wuxian busied himself setting up an array that would suppress the demon's remains and keep others away while Lan Wangji finished cleansing the resentful miasma that the demon had left behind. He felt the heavy weight of Lan Wangji's gaze on him the entire time, which only made it more difficult to keep from shivering in response to the touch of his qi in the air around them.

He wondered if it would always be like this, when they night hunted together. The thought of this being a life he was allowed to have set a craving deep in his core. The level of want was an overpowering, dark need that Wei Wuxian knew he would need to be wary of, just as he knew he would not emerge unscathed if and when reality reasserted itself and his foolish fantasy crashed and burned around him.

When they deem the area sufficiently safe, they mounted their swords and returned to the village.

The return trip took much less time, since they flew rather than walked. They arrived a few hours before dawn, expecting the village to be asleep. But the elder who had sent for them had stationed a youth to keep watch for their return, and the young boy immediately set off to go and fetch his master despite the late hour. The man quickly returned, bowing deeply in gratitude.

"What was it that was plaguing our village? Was it a beast or a human?"

"It was a demon, who was close to ascending into an immortal beast from what we could tell," Wei Wuxian replied.

He described the creature's appearance, including its human-like face and level of resentful energy.

"It was particularly focused on Hanguang-Jun, likely hoping to use his potent spiritual power to get closer to ascension," Wei Wuxian concluded.

The elder looked extremely concerned, given how dangerous it would be to have such a thing so close to his village.

"There had been rumors of a temple up in the mountains two days' walk from here, where the monks were all killed by an unknown creature, including the master. They were not trained in fighting, but focused mostly on meditation and asceticism."

Wei Wuxian nodded grimly. "They wouldn't have been able to defend themselves against a mid-level demonic beast, but their combined spiritual power would have allowed the resentful beast to become a full demon."

“It is lucky that you came when you did, and were able to destroy the demon. On behalf of our village, this one expresses his deep gratitude.”

The old man bowed deeply again, which Wei Wuxian was quick to return, though he felt the pull in his ribs as he did. Lan Wangji also bowed.

“It is our duty to help,” Lan Wangji said simply, though his eyes had now moved to Wei Wuxian. “But we have sustained some minor injuries and must now take our rest.”

“Of course! Please, allow me to escort you to the inn. There will be no charge for your rooms, or any food or services you require during your recovery here. We don’t have a doctor, but there is a healer who has some minor skills. I can send him to you if you require.”

Wei Wuxian opened his mouth to thank the man, but Lan Wangji was already speaking.

“Thank you. We will inform you if we require your healer.”

The man nodded, though he looked somewhat confused at Lan Wangji’s refusal of the healer. Wei Wuxian felt similarly, as even a moderately skilled healer would have things for cuts and bruises, even if they couldn’t heal more complex spiritual wounds.

They walked to the inn where the elder woke the innkeeper, and he thanked them again and bade them farewell.

The innkeeper blinked the sleep out of his eyes, though showed no annoyance at being woken from his bed at the extremely late hour. The killings were the reason that his inn had no other guests, so he was more than happy to offer them free room and board.

He was deferential as he walked them both up to their rooms. Lan Wangji was, of course, shown to the larger room, which Wei Wuxian noticed had two beds. The innkeeper apologized, saying that they did not have many rooms, but that they would give the double room to Lan Wangji for his private use. Their largest single room would be given to Wei Wuxian.

It was stupid to waste the use of a second room, if the first room had two beds, but Lan Wangji gave Wei Wuxian a look when he drew a breath to say as much, and assured the innkeeper that the arrangement was fine.

The innkeeper breathed a sigh of relief at not having offended the famous and powerful Hanguang-Jun with his lack of appropriate offerings. He assured both of them that he would arrange for the water for their baths to be heated and brought up when it was ready. He left Lan Wangji to his room while he showed Wei Wuxian to his smaller, single room before heading down to ensure the bath preparation was going smoothly.

Wei Wuxian closed the door behind the man, and sat down on the small, wooden chair in the corner of the room. He pulled out his sleeping robes, feeling a mixture of relief that Lan Wangji was not going to be able to see his wounds before he’d had time to heal them somewhat, but also wishing that there had only been one room at the inn.

He was surprised when there was a knock on the door. It would be at least a half an hour before the bath water would be ready. He opened the door to find Lan Wangji.

“I came to check Wei Ying’s wounds.” Lan Wangji’s expression did not give the slightest sign that he was thinking about what had happened just a few hours ago when Wei Wuxin had checked *his* wounds.

Unfortunately, Wei Wuxian’s face was not as thick, and he felt the heat creeping up his neck and along his cheek bones.

“It would have been easier for you to check my wounds if we’d shared your room, instead of taking up two,” Wei Wuxian said, allowing Lan Wangji to enter his room and closing the door behind him. The room had felt empty when Wei Wuxian had been alone in it. Being in the small space with Lan Wangji made it feel almost as though there was not even enough space to breathe, every corner filled with an almost tangible tension.

“I promised Jiang Guniang we would procure separate rooms,” Lan Wangji replied.

Wei Wuxian brought himself up short. *Of course, Lan Wangji would need to be careful of his reputation.* A whisper in the back of his head told him that *Wei Wuxian was fine for a roll in the dirt, but wasn’t someone that Lan Wangji would want to be seen with in public* .

Wei Wuxian recognized the Seal’s influence, and forced himself to remember all the words that Lan Wangji had actually spoken, to him and also in front of some of the most influential people in the cultivation world. Lan Wangji did not lie. He wasn’t hiding from some innkeeper when he’d made his intentions clear to people like Nie Mingjue and Jiang Cheng.

The whisperings in Wei Wuxian’s head died down, but the jitteriness remained behind. Lan Wangji was watching him carefully, in a way that made Wei Wuxian feel uncomfortably seen.

“I think we sort of defeated the purpose of separate rooms out in the woods, Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian joked, though something of his thoughts must have been written on his face.

Lan Wangji was crossing the room, sliding his hands along the sharp line of Wei Wuxian’s jaw, tilting it up before threading his long fingers into Wei Wuxian’s hair.

“Jiang Guniang is concerned about the optics of us procuring only one room, to protect your reputation. She did not ask me to stop courting Wei Ying.”

Wei Wuxian couldn’t stop the slightly bitter twist to his lips.

“I’m pretty sure that the only one whose reputation could get worse is yours. If anything, being associated even in a cut-sleeve rumor with the great Hanguang-Jun would only improve mine.”

“They are wrong. Wei Ying is good.” The words were so simple, but the intensity of the sincerity with which they were spoken was devastating.

“Lan Zhan! You can’t just *say* things like that!” Wei Wuxian felt a very dangerous rush of emotion flood through him, overflowing with everything he knew better than to allow himself to want. The sort of things that were never meant for someone like him.

Wei Wuxian had spent his life carefully not wanting anything other than what he could build with his own hands and his own determination. He had never been greedy, until now.

But Lan Wangji had given him a taste of what it could be like to belong to him. Night hunting with a cultivation partner that was truly his equal. Someone who cared about him, despite all his flaws and unworthiness. Despite all his darkness.

And now, Wei Wuxian *wanted* , and the depths of it unsettled him. Lan Wangji was willing to give him something, but Wei Wuxian wanted so much more. He wanted everything. He wanted to crawl inside Lan Wangji's bones and live there. He wanted to have Lan Wangji never even look at another person. He wanted to be consumed by him, and consume him in return, like a deadly undertow that would pull Lan Wangji away from everything he knew and drag him down into the dark depths that was Wei Wuxian.

Lan Wangji reached out and brushed a thumb along Wei Wuxian's plush lower lip, his eyes heavy lidded and dark.

"Wei Ying said I needed to convince him that I desired him. And that I was amenable to the physical acts of dual cultivation."

Wei Wuxian had raised an undead army and taken down the most powerful cultivation sect in the world, but he was about to go into qi deviation over the unflinching *intent* inLan Wangji's words.

Wei Wuxian shuddered, leaning forward slightly so Lan Wangji's thumb slid into the hot, wet heat of Wei Wuxian's mouth. Lan Wangji's eyes darkened further, and the air ran thick between them.

Lan Wangji drew a slow breath, then pulled back.

"I will check your injuries first."

Wei Wuxian knew that the mood was going to be totally killed when he pulled off his robes and Lan Wangji saw the bruising that was hidden beneath them. But he also recognized the determined set to Lan Wangji's jaw, and knew he would not be dissuaded.

"Ah, Lan Zhan. If you wanted me to take my clothes off, you should have just asked." Wei Wuxian titled his head to the side, expecting Lan Wangji to call him shameless, or to blush at his words, the way he always had in the past.

Instead, Lan Wangji pinned him with a heavy-lidded gaze.

"Mm. Mark your words, Wei Ying."

And… holy *shit* . Wei Wuxian would likely have been blushing more, except the majority of his blood seemed to be rushing due south.

"Lan Zhan! So bold now. You would have been so angry at me if I'd said this back when we were at Cloud Recesses together. You hated even standing next to me, much less the idea of touching me. "

Wei Wuxian's brain was still processing the fact that Lan Wangji had managed to be more shameless than him, and was barely registering that Lan Wangji had begun undoing the ties of Wei Wuxian's robes.

"Mn. I never hated the idea of touching you."

Wei Wuxian would have called Lan Wangji a liar, except that he knew that the Second Jade never lied. Wei Wuxian gaped at him, feeling shocked and flustered and darkly possessive all at the same time. He laughed, because he didn't really know what else to do, and tried to make a joke about it while his entire grasp on the reality of Lan Wangji seemed to tilt on its axis.

"Oh, really? Lan Zhan was so enamored of me and my rule breaking ways that all his anger was really just a front for him wanting to pin me down and have his wicked way with me?"

Lan Wangji leaned in, his large hands sliding under Wei Wuxian's inner robe, which was somehow already undone.

"Mn. Wei Ying is very smart."

"Wait. *What?!* Lan *Zhan* ! I was *joking* ! I mean, you never thought about things like… we never even…" Wei Wuxian sputtered, while Lan Wangji ran his hands soothingly along Wei Wuxian's sides, as though trying to calm a nervous animal.

"Wei Ying did not think about such things. Jiang Guniang explained to me. I will give you time to adjust to such thoughts."

Wei Wuxian was quite sure that his brain was not going to be able to 'adjust to such thoughts', because his brain had ceased to function at the sheer impossibility of *Lan Wangji* having lustful thoughts about him since they were teenagers. That was just not… Lan Wangji was meant to think about *poetry* and *nature* and… and… *advanced cultivation techniques!*

He looked up to find Lan Wangji watching him, his expression managing to look both fond and exasperated all without even moving any of his perfectly moulded features.

Before Wei Wuxian could think of something to say in response, Lan Wangji's gaze dropped to his chest as the last of his robes were pushed aside. The softness that had been on his face was instantly replaced with a frown.

"Wei Ying!" Lan Wangji said, looking at the mottled, blue-black bruising that covered much of Wei Wuxian's chest.

"It's fine, Lan Zhan! It's just a bruise. It will be mostly healed by morning."

Lan Wangji shot him a scathing glare.

"Wei Ying was not fully healed. Your ribs could be cracked."

He gently pulled Wei Wuxian forward so he could see his back, and gave another noise of displeasure.

"You should have told me you were injured after the battle."

Lan Wangji seemed more distressed than the degree of injury would warrant.

“It’s no big deal. It’s not like I was bleeding out or anything. I’ve had way worse.”

“I was… not careful. With Wei Ying. After.” Lan Wangji sounded truly distraught.

It took Wei Wuxian a moment to realize what Lan Wangji seemed to be so upset about. When he realized what it was, he laughed.

“Ah, Lan Zhan. I’m not some gentle maiden you need to handle with care.”

“I care about you. I want to take care of Wei Ying.” Lan Wangji looked distressed, which was unacceptable. “I should have had more control.”

“Ahaha, I’m fine! You don’t need to worry. You didn’t hurt me. Hanguang-Jun is the most controlled man in all the cultivation world!”

“Not when it comes to Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji said, the words spoken with a hard, angry tone that Wei Wuxian could tell Lan Wangji was directing at himself.

“Lan Zhan. I *liked it* . I like it when you’re not gentle. I’m not… I like it when it hurts.”

Lan Wangji’s golden eyes snapped to Wei Wuxian’s, *seeing* him in a way that Wei Wuxian was not entirely comfortable with. But if Lan Wangji could reveal how he’d felt about Wei Wuxian, then Wei Wuxian could return the favor.

“Explain,” Lan Wangji said, his eyes dark and intense.

Wei Wuxian licked his suddenly dry lips, feeling the weight of Lan Wangji’s gaze as he clocked the movement. Having Lan Wangji all up in his space, watching him with a burning, heavy-lidded gaze, made it hard for Wei Wuxian to gather his thoughts. But he owed Lan Wangji an answer.

“I like it. When you lose control. When you take, instead of making me have to give.”

Lan Wangji’s lips parted, his eyes darkening, encouraging Wei Wuxian to continue.

“I’m not always in control,” Wei Wuxian said. “The power I wield, some of it… it’s hard. There are times, during the war when.. But if my control slipped, who could stop me? I like it when you pin me down, when I don’t have to think. When I don’t have to choose. I trust Lan Zhan more than I trust Wei Ying.”

Lan Wangji made a sound low in his throat, his lips crashing down over Wei Wuxian’s, moving harshly as his thumbs dug into the hinge of Wei Wuxian’s jaw, forcing it to open for him.

“Trust Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji breathed into his mouth. “I always trust Wei Ying.”

Down the hall, they could hear a knock on the door to Lan Wangji’s room. It was one of the servants at the inn, bringing them their bath water.

Wei Wuxian cursed the bad timing, but Lan Wangji was already pulling away, straightening his immaculate robes, then doing the same for Wei Wuxian.

By the time there was a knock on their door, they were both looking reasonably presentable, especially considering they'd just returned from a difficult night hunt.

Lan Wangji asked the servants about the skills of the healer in terms of dealing with things like possibly broken ribs, but they said that they usually called for a doctor from a neighboring village for more serious injuries. Lan Wangji thanked them as they left.

"Aiya, Lan Zhan!" Wei Wuxian said after the door had closed, leaving them alone in the room once more. "You're still worried about my ribs?"

Lan Wangji arched an eyebrow. "Does Wei Ying wish to face Wen Daifu and Jiang Guniang and explain our carelessness to them, if we make your injury worse?"

Wei Wuxian paused. It was an extremely valid point. He had no fear about taking on a demon, but Wen Qing's fury was something else entirely. Much less his own sister's gentle disappointment and worry.

"Ugh. Fine. Go take your bath and I'll take mine." Wei Wuxian knew he was sulking, but he felt like he deserved it.

Lan Wangji's lips curve slightly into the hint of a smile.

Wei Wuxian settled into the tub, letting the heat from the water seep into his sore muscles. His mind was still processing everything that happened between him and Lan Wangji in the past two days. Marriage was never something he'd really thought about in the past, but now it was almost consuming him, like a door in his mind had been opened that could never be closed again.

He desired Lan Wangji. Of course he did. Who wouldn't?

But what he felt was so much more than simple desire, or even admiration for the man's skills. Wei Wuxian knew he was not the same person he had been before the war. Before the Burial Mounds. The resentful energy that gave Wei Wuxian nearly unlimited power also ate away at his control, and left whispers in his mind that he had to constantly be on guard for. He craved Lan Wangji's strength in a different way than he might have in the past. He didn't need Lan Zhan to protect him from the monsters that they hunted. He needed Lan Zhan to protect him from the monster that Wei Wuxian knew that he was at risk of becoming.

Wei Wuxian could let go with Lan Wangji. The notion of that level of trust was terrifying on many levels, but Wei Wuxian knew it in his bones. There could be no one else for him but Lan Zhan. Not in that way.

He thought about Lan Wangji, likely finishing his bath and preparing for bed just down the hall. He could go to him. He could knock on his door and there was almost zero chance that Lan Wangji would not allow him in. The thought was a heady one. But he also respected that Lan Wangji wanted to win the approval of the Lan elders as well as Wei Wuxian's make-shift family. Their night hunt here was likely to cause talk, given the demon that they had taken down. It would be best to wait until they were out of so many public eyes. They would be back in the Unclean Realm in less than a day. He would make himself wait until then.

Lan Wangji knocked on Wei Wuxian's door early the next morning. Wei Wuxian would have been annoyed about being woken up so early, but Lan Wangji's hungry gaze on his sleep-rumpled robes made the annoyance dry up.

"We should return to the Unclean Realm as soon as possible. I have already ordered breakfast for us."

The words were perfectly proper, as expected of Hanguang-Jun. But the heat that simmered in his eyes made it clear that there was a reason that Lan Wangji wanted to leave the inn, and it was only partly due to concern about Wei Wuxian's bruising.

Wei Wuxian was in full agreement, so after a rapidly eaten breakfast, they began their journey back to the Unclean Realm.

When they arrived, there was already a message waiting for Lan Wangji from Cloud Recesses that a delegation would be arriving the following day, much sooner than anticipated. Nie Huaisang Meng Yao, and Jiang Yanli were there to greet them, bringing news of the response.

"I thought it would take them a while to come!" Wei Wuxian said, not sure what the suddenness of the response might mean.

"Mn," Lan Wangji inclined his head in acknowledgment. "Uncle and Brother must have realized the degree of my intent."

Wei Wuxian looked at Lan Wangji. "What, *exactly* , did you say in your letter?"

"I was clear in my request," was all that Lan Wangji replied.

Meng Yao looked nonplussed, but Nie Huaisang looked thoughtful as he looked at the response.

"It's not just Zewu-Jun and Lan Qiren. They are also bringing three other members of the Lan council."

Lan Wangji's expression didn't change, but somehow it seemed to harden. He clearly recognized the names on the note and was not pleased with them.

"Did you threaten to leave the sect if they don't reverse their ruling?" Meng Yao asked, a small frown appearing on his face. Wei Wuxian had a feeling he understood the meaning of the specific names on the list as well as Lan Wangji did.

"No," Lan Wangji replied. "It will not matter. They will decide what they decide, and I will make my own decisions, accordingly."

"Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian began, the familiar guilt filling his stomach at the thought of Lan Wangji needing to give up anything for his sake. "You don't need to-"

"There is *every* need," Lan Wangji said firmly.

Jiang Yanli had been quiet throughout the entire exchange after greeting them both, carefully observing their interactions. She gave Lan Wangji a small, approving smile.

"A-Xian. You have to trust Lan Wangji to make the right decision for himself."

Wei Wuxian could never win an argument that was based on his level of trust in Lan Wangji, but he didn't have to like it.

"Wei Ying was injured by the demon. Where is Wen Guniang?"

Lan Wangji's question put a stop to any further discussion about the upcoming delegation's arrival as Wei Wuxian was immediately shepherded to Wen Qing's medical room. After a few scathing remarks about Wei Wuxian's self preservation abilities, she determined that his ribs were not broken, only bruised. She also examined Lan Wangji's injury and deemed it healing well.

Wen Yuan arrived at the end of the exam, and was filled with excitement to hear about the demon as well as to tell them all about his experience in the children's dormitory. Wei Wuxian watched as A-Yuan chattered happily with Lan Wangji, bringing the quiet man into his conversation as naturally as breathing.

It made Wei Wuxian ache.

As much as Lan Wangji had said he was steadfast in his desire to be with Wei Wuxian, Wei Wuxian was dreading what might happen the following day when the Lan Sect delegation arrived. In his deepest depths, he could not really believe that Lan Wangji would choose him over his home, family, and entire life. He was torn between desperately hoping Lan Wangji would come to his senses and stay with his sect (because Lan Wangji deserved to be praised and accepted, not cast out and disowned), and equally desperately hoping Lan Wangji would stay by his side forever and disappear from the world of sect politics and expectations.

But Jiang Yanli was right. It was not Wei Wuxian's choice to make. It had to be Lan Wangji's. And Wei Wuxian knew himself well enough that he would try to push Lan Wangji one way or the other if they talked now. He didn't trust himself. He was barely holding on to his own turbulent emotions, his mind careening wildly from one extreme imagined outcome to another. So he stayed around Lan Wangji, but always in the presence of others. A-Yuan had missed him, and it was easy to use the child's presence as a shield to keep Wei Wuxian from saying things he shouldn't.

They sat beside each other during dinner, and conversation flowed around them. He could feel Lan Wangji's concerned gaze on him but couldn't make himself meet it. When dinner was done, he made the excuse of needing to put A-Yuan to bed to excuse himself early.

Wei Wuxian knew that Lan Wangji wanted to speak with him. Wanted to probably do more than speak with him. But until he knew what was going to happen when Lan Wangji faced down his family, he couldn't handle getting in any more over his head than he already was.

Not that it mattered. He was already drowning.

Wei Wuxian woke to the mid-morning sun streaming in his window, A-Yuan curled tightly against his chest. They had both slept late and someone was knocking on the door.

"A-Xian," Jiang Yanli's voice came from outside the door. "The Lan delegation arrived early. I've come to help you get ready. You need to hurry. They are serving them tea, but the meeting

will begin in under an hour.”

Her words were a bucket of ice water. Normally, Wei Wuxian didn’t really care about what he wore or how he looked. But today, Lan Wangji’s family was going to be judging him, and - while ‘be tidy in appearance’ was not nearly as important a rule as ‘do not associate with evil’ - Wei Wuxian was not going to push it.

He immediately let Jiang Yanli in, and gently roused A-Yuan. Jiang Yanli got A-Yuan ready while Wei Wuxian quickly bathed and dressed. Jiang Yanli had brought food for them, which they ate while she combed out their hair.

By the time that they had finished eating, they were as presentable as they were going to get.

"A-Xian is looking very handsome for his future in-laws," Jiang Yanli teased, though her eyes at a worried tension that he knew was reflected in his own.

It was extremely unlikely that the Lan elders, Lan Qiren in particular, would change their minds on the banishment of Wei Wuxian, much less give Lan Wangji their blessing for courtship and marriage.

Wei Wuxian looked at himself in the mirror. Whatever else was going to happen, at least he would make a good first impression on the three elders who would be involved in deciding his fate.

Wei Wuxian absolutely did not make a good first impression.

Wen Yuan was met by Wen Ning and taken outside to play while Wei Wuxian and Jiang Yanli walked quickly to the room where the Lan delegation had been taken. If things went well, then A-Yuan would be brought in and introduced to Lan Wangji's elders. But if it went as Wei Wuxian expected it to go, then the little boy did not need to witness it.

Wei Wuxian felt his stomach tense as they neared the room at the end of the hall. The door was partially ajar, likely because their presence was expected. Voices were coming from the room. Wei Wuxian could recognize the low timbre of Lan Wangji’s voice, though he could not quite hear the words he spoke.

Another voice spoke, sharp with imperious anger. It wasn’t quite a shout, but it was about as close as a Lan would get. By the sounds of things, the conversation had been going for some time. Wei Wuxian and Jiang Yanli slowed and exchanged a glance, uncertain if they should interrupt or wait until there was a lull in the conversation to enter.

“Lan Wangji. You have said enough. It is not our duty to listen to you. It is *your* duty to listen to *us* , as your elders. A duty which you have been remiss in doing for quite some time! The elders ordered you to return home weeks ago. You have violated our orders once again! We forbade you to contact Wei Wuxian, and you continue to flout our edict. Not to mention violate some of our most sacred rules! *Reject the crooked path. Do not associate with evil. Be loyal. Be filial. Be dutiful!* ”

This time, Lan Zhan's words were said more forcefully, with an edge that Wei Wuxian had never heard him use in the presence of his elders before. " *Believe sincerely. Uphold the value of justice. Shoulder the weight of morality. Be fair, and others will follow. Do not judge without understanding. Do not hold grudges. Do not take advantage of your position to oppress others* ."

"Wangji!" Lan Qiren's voice snapped out.

Evidently the last rule that Lan Wangji had laid down was viewed as a low blow. Wei Wuxian would have almost found it funny if he could not feel the raw emotion vibrating in Lan Wangji's words. Lan Wangji had been dutiful his entire life. He did not take his words lightly.

The other sect leader who had been speaking earlier resumed, his voice now firmly crossing the line into shouting.

"You have the audacity to have us summoned here, and show us this sort of disrespect! We will not hear your arguments. We will not meet with this demonic cultivator. You will return with us to Cloud Recesses and face punishment. Given the seriousness of your violations, you will be lucky if you are not punished with the discipline whip. You will leave with us immediately!"

As soon as the words 'discipline whip' left the elder's mouth, Wei Wuxian stopped listening to him. They would *dare* to harm Lan Zhan? His own *sect* , to which he'd dedicated his entire life? Rage filled Wei Wuxian. The hall seemed to darken as he strode forward to the door, his eyes hazing red. He vaguely heard Jiang Yanli call out to him, but it was a distant sound.

The discipline whip was known to be a crippling spiritual weapon, a hundred times worse than *Zidian* . It was not unusual for cultivators to die from its application, which is why it was so rarely used. If the Lan dared to use it on Lan Wangji, then Wei Wuxian would burn Cloud Recesses to the fucking *ground.*

Chenqing was in his hand before he even realized it as he slammed the door fully open. Conversation ceased and all eyes snapped to Wei Wuxian as he walked slowly into the room. Everyone in the room was already on their feet, the tea ignored between them. Clearly, the welcome discussions had not been going well. Nie Mingjue stood at the head of the table, looking angry. Wei Wuxian had the sense that the anger was not directed at him, but rather towards the Lan delegation. Lan Wangji stood to Nie MIngjue's right, his face carefully blank in the way that Wei Wuxian knew meant he was upset.

Lan Xichen, Lan Qiren and three other elderly men in Lan robes were standing across the table from Lan Wangji, Nie Huaisang, and Meng Yao. Wei Wuxian barely saw any of them, his eyes narrowing at the Lan elder who had been speaking when he walked in.

The man looked angry, arrogant, and unrepentant. Any thoughts of trying to appease someone like this vaporized in a dark curl of anger. This man was putting his pride and arrogance ahead of Lan Wangji's life. Memories of being under the lash of *Zidian* , kneeling down as it struck his fled over and over twisted inside him. He would not allow someone to make Lan Zhan feel that way. Wei Wuxian might have deserved it, but Lan Wangji did *not* .

“If you want to whip Lan Zhan without even hearing his words, you will have to go through me, first.” Wei Wuxian’s voice was cold and deadly, even to his own ears.

He had been worried about what Lan Wangji was giving up if he left the Lan Sect. But if his sect leaders were willing to use the discipline whip on him for this, without even letting Lan Wangji explain his piece, then they did not deserve him.

The elder who had been speaking just seconds before was staring at him, fear warring with anger on his face. Wei Wuxian’s grip on *Chenqing* tightened, as he tried to keep his temper in check. His effort appeared to be wasted as the elder’s face shifted more firmly towards anger.

“Nie Mingjue! Will you allow such a show of disrespect?” The senior elder turned to glare at Nie Mingjue. His lack of use of the proper title in addressing the man did not go unnoticed by the Nie sect leader.

“I invited you to the Unclean Realm for a discussion. You are the one who is refusing to allow others to speak,” Nie Mingjue said.

The elder scoffed, but evidently knew better than to directly disparage the leader of an allied sect any more than he already had. He turned, instead, to face Wei Wuxian. “You have no business interfering with Lan sect matters. You are not and will never be a member of our sect.”

“Anything involving Lan Zhan’s safety is my business,” Wei Wuxian said. He could feel Lan Wangji’s gaze on him, but he could not read his thoughts.

The senior elder looked, if anything, even angrier at the words. “Lan Wangji is a member of the Lan sect. We will discipline him as we see fit. He has desecrated the reputation of our sect through his association with you.”

Lan Wangji narrowed his eyes at the words, true anger flashing in them that further spurred Wei Wuxian’s own.

“*Do not praise yourself and slander others. Be careful with your words. Be aware of the potential consequences of your actions* .” Wei Wuxian had copied the rules enough to remember them now. He smiled cold and deadly at the now sputtering Lan elder. The darkness that always lived just below Wei Wuxian’s skin was surging out, casting the room in shadow despite the numerous lanterns. “Harming Lan Zhan will most definitely have consequences. And as for me daring to interrupt, you will find there is not much I wouldn’t dare for Lan Zhan. Do not test me.”

The room itself seemed to hold its breath as the moment stretched taut.

In under two minutes, Wei Wuxian’s goals for this meeting had gone from ‘make a good impression on Lan Zhan’s elders’ to ‘don’t kill Lan Zhan’s elders unless you really, really have to.’

Whether or not the elder in question remained breathing depended entirely on what the man decided to do next. Wei Wuxian would find out if the Lan’s reputation for intelligence was, in fact, earned.

Wei Wuxian's gaze was so focused on the senior elder that he missed the way Lan Xichen's face shifted from frozen to relieved. He also missed the way Lan Qiren was watching Wei Wuxian as though trying to solve an unexpected puzzle.

To be continued…

A/N - ok so I have always had REALLY mixed feelings about the ending in novel canon regarding Cloud Recesses, wwx, and lwj (if you are reading the novel for the first time please be aware the comment responses **might spoil the ending of the novel** if you have somehow avoided finding out all this time in this fandom, so you might want to skip them!!!). I would love to know what people think. If lwj and wwx were able to get lqr to come around to understand better, do you think it would be enough for them to want to stay in CR? Or do you think that - after everything - they would prefer to be somewhere else/unaffiliated? I know where I am leaning but I am really curious where you all are on this.

Chapter 42: Empathy

A/N - Happy New Year!! Hope everyone had a restful holiday. I am not holding my breath for 2022 to be a lot better, after being tricked by 2021 LOL. Here is the big showdown with the Lan elders. I hope you enjoy it!! Only one more chapter left and then we will be DONE! If you are interseted in scenes from other's POVs or timestamps (probably they will all be smutty, tbh), you can subscribe to the series so you will be notified about them if I post more in this universe. I got behind in my replies to comments with all the holiday craziness, but hopefully will catch up soon.

Thanks to ZazGeek for beta-ing!

"Wei Ying." Lan Wangji's controlled, steady voice cut through the dark-red fog of Wei Wuxian's anger.

The senior Lan elder's eyes were wide, his skin pale in fear as he stood across the table from Wei Wuxian. Lan Wangji's hand rested calmly on Wei Wuxian's forearm, causing him to slightly loosen the death grip he had on *Chenqing*.

The heavy, oppressive aura that had filled the room with a terrifying spiritual pressure slowly began to ease. Most of the cultivators in the room were pale and wide-eyed. Lan Wangji and Jiang Yanli, however, looked at Wei Wuxian with concern, not fear. Nie Mingjue had a look that was somewhere between smug and warily amused.

"Good. Now that Wuxian is here, we can begin the meeting," Nie Mingjue said, taking his seat at the head of the table as though Wei Wuxian hadn't just threatened to kill potentially a large percentage of the meeting attendees only moments before.

Meng Yao began pouring the tea, which had been kept warm by a heating talisman. If his hand was slightly unsteady, no one commented. Nie Huaisang sat as well, with Lan Wangji and Lan Xichen following suit. Soon the entire group was seated. Wei Wuxian was the last to sit, his eyes warily assessing the Lan elders for any sign of aggression.

The tension in the room was high, and it was clear that everyone had plenty to say but were not quite sure if they were willing to risk the wrath of the Yiling Laozu by speaking rashly.

A tense silence descended in the room, with the Lan uncertain how to proceed, and Wei Wuxian not feeling generous enough to start the conversation given what it appeared the old men in white had to say about things.

Nie Mingjue nodded to Meng Yao, signaling him to begin the proceedings. Meng Yao inclined his head, folded his hand primly before him, and took charge of the meeting.

"The Nie sect welcomes the Lan delegation," Meng Yao began, with a voice so calm and pleasant it was almost jarring against the heavy atmosphere of the room.

The Lan elders finally managed to tear their eyes away from Wei Wuxian to glare at Meng Yao, whose smile only widened.

“I apologize if my letter of invitation to Sect Leader Lan sounded at all like a summons. That was definitely not my intent. This humble one begs forgiveness if his language was not chosen carefully,” Meng Yao said, standing and executing a perfect bow.

Wei Wuxian had not seen any of the letters that had been sent to GusuLan, but he was absolutely sure that nothing Meng Yao had sent could possibly have been worded as a summons. It was clear, however, that - whatever the letter had contained - it had not been addressed to the man who was currently complaining about it. Lan Xichen’s eyes met Meng Yao’s and Wei Wuxian was sure there was a glint of wry humor there before his expression smoothed again. The elder who had spoken earlier tightened his lips fractionally, then inclined his head slightly.

“It was not *your* note that we took issue with,” the senior Elder said to Meng Yao before turning his glare to Lan Wangji.

Lan Wangji stood, and bowed to his elders with perfect grace. “This humble disciple apologizes if his request to provide missing information to Uncle and Brother was viewed as a summons by his Elders.”

To an outsider, the words, tone and body language would appear to have been perfectly humble and contrite. To someone who had copied the Lan sect rules as many times as Wei Wuxian (much less someone who studied them as much as a Lan elder would have), it was a huge ‘fuck you’. Wei Wuxian had to fight down an admiring grin. Lan Wangji was reminding the elders that they had not, in fact, even been invited, much less summoned. He was also pointing out that - if they left without hearing him out - they would be violating their own sect rules. Ones that immediately sprang to Wei Wuxian’s mind included:

The quest for knowledge is truth.

Do not judge without understanding.

Do not make assumptions.

But he was sure there were others, judging by the sour expressions on the Lan elders’ faces. And the fact that Lan Wangji had used their own rules couched in carefully defferential language only made the ‘fuck you’ that much more elegant and bitchy.

Ok, so Wei Wuxian might not have been completely successful at keeping the smirk off his face. Despite the elegance of the move, Nie Mingjue had no patience for the subtle barbs that were being traded when the Lan elders did not respond to Lan Wangji’s words.

“If the Lan elders do not wish to participate in this meeting, then they are free to leave,” Nie Mingjue said, calling their bluff.

They could posture all they wanted, but if they really did not want to be here, then they never would have made the journey and everyone here knew it. It was really only Lan Xichen and Lan Qiren who had been invited, and everyone in the room was now aware of that fact.

The elders looked displeased, but did not move from their seats. Meng Yao beamed as though they'd said something gracious.

"Excellent. We are aware that GusuLan has issued a ban on Wei Wuxian, forbidding him entry to GusuLan territories and also forbidding any Lan disciple from speaking or otherwise interacting with Wei Wuxian. Is this still true?" Meng Yao asked politely.

"Yes," Lan Qiren replied, eyeing Meng Yao narrowly. "Demonic cultivation is forbidden. As is associating with anyone who walks the crooked path."

"Oh?" Nie Huaisang shifted, drawing many eyes to him. He fluttered his fan up, covering his face. "Sorry. Sorry! I just… it seems odd. If there are already rules in place about not associating with anyone who walks the crooked path, why add a redundant rule just for one person?"

"We felt it was necessary, for clarity," one of the other elders said.

"S*peak meagerly. Do not be unnecessarily repetitive. Do not hold grudges."* Lan Wangji stated tightly, looking at his uncle.

Lan Qiren bristled. "Enough, Wangji. You sent us a ridiculous letter claiming you had made a betrothal offer to Wei Wuxian, without getting proper blessing from your elders. You knew the banishment on that boy had not been lifted, yet you still persevered in this ridiculous notion. What do you have to say for your actions?"

Lan Wangji stood perfectly straight, his face expressionless to those who did not know him well enough to see the steely anger behind his gaze.

"Uncle told me that I would have the ability to choose a suitable cultivation partner," Lan Wangji replied.

"Suitable! A *suitable* cultivation partner!" Lan Qiren stated. "In what way is the Yiling Patriarch, a *demonic cultivator* a suitable partner for the heir to GusuLan?"

The question was clearly meant to be rhetorical, but it was answered by an angry voice as the door was slammed open for the second time since the GusuLan delegation had arrived and a swirl of angry purple strode into the room.

"Are you saying my brother isn't suitable? Who the fuck does GusuLan think it is that the brother of the Jiang sect leader isn't good enough?"

Wei Wuxian felt a surge of affection for his scowling *shidi* , though he had not expected him to bother coming for this. Most of the other occupants in the room appeared equally surprised except for Jiang Yanli, Nie Huaisang and Meng Yao.

"A-Cheng. I was afraid you wouldn't arrive in time for the discussion," Jiang Yanli said, smiling warmly at her brother.

Wei Wuxian's mind was still reeling at the fact that Jiang Cheng had come. As much as he had always felt like a brother to Jiang Yanli, things had always been more strained with Jiang Cheng.

Leaving the Jiang had meant that they were no longer martial brothers, according to the cultivation world. But Jiang Cheng still viewed him as such, and was claiming him in front of the most influential figures. His ties with the Lan sect could be strained from this, at a time when the Jiang needed allies. The fact of his presence made Wei Wuxian feel simultaneously guilty and happy.

“If anything is going to be decided about Wei Wuxian, the Jiang sect should have input,” Jiang Cheng snapped, moving to sit in one of the remaining free seats, which was - unfortunately - next to the Lan elders.

“The Jiang sect has already given their input on Wei Wuxian,” Lan Qiren said, clearly displeased with the interruption. “They banished him. We are in agreement with the Jiang sect’s stance.”

“The Jiang sect has withdrawn its banishment,” Jiang Cheng said, glaring first at the Lan elder, then at Wei Wuxian. “The banishment was done without my father’s input, and certainly without mine. As the current Jiang Sect leader, I have decided that Wei Wuxian is entitled to return to Lotus Pier any time.”

Wei Wuxian looked at his brother’s face, looking to see any sense of hesitation or conflicted feelings, but all he saw was Jiang Cheng’s usual scowl that he always wore when he was feeling uncomfortably affectionate and didn’t know what to do about it.

“Hm. Well, be that as it may, the Lan sect has its own principles that are not determined by the Jiang. Just because Wei Wuxian is no longer banished from the Jiang sect does not make him a suitable partner for Lan Wangji,” one of the Lan elders said.

Lan Wangji frowned slightly. “Political alliances are often built on strengthening ties to other sects. The Jiang opinion is therefore relevant.” Jiang Cheng looked shocked at having Lan Wangji say something almost nice about him.

“That is not the only criteria,” one of the Lan elders said.

“Mm,” Lan Wangji acknowledged. “Successfully dual cultivation requires partners similar in core strength. Wei Ying’s golden core is equal to my own.”

Lan Wangji had turned to look directly at Wei Wuxian when he spoke the last sentence, his eyes heavy-lidded with purpose. Wei Wuxian got the feeling that there was more being said than he was picking up on, but the intensity of the look alone was enough to make Wei Wuxian swallow.

“Before the war, I agreed to the Elders’ request to seek a cultivation partner,” Lan Wangji continued. “To reach immortality, compatibility is required. Wei Ying is compatible. It is unlikely another could be found who meets both criteria. Wei Ying is uniquely suitable as a cultivation partner, if life extension is a goal.””

Nie Huaisang’s fan flickered up, and Wei Wuxian could see the way he waggled his eyebrows at him. Jiang Yanli covered her mouth with her sleeve, but Wei Wuxian could tell by her eyes that she was trying not to laugh.

“Gross. We don’t need to hear about that!” Jiang Cheng scowled.

It had been widely spoken about before the war that the Lan elders had been seeking a cultivation partner for Lan Wangji in the hopes they could achieve a Lan disciple who ascended to the immortal status. They could hardly deny it, but they did not look pleased at either the reminder of their original goal, nor of the knowledge that Wei Wuxian met the criteria.

Lan Qiren scowled and opened his mouth to speak, but Lan Xichen raised his hand to forestall him.

“Uncle asked Wangji a question before Sect Leader Jiang arrived. We must allow him to complete his answer.”

The elders, including Lan Qiren, did not look happy, but Lan Xichen was still the sect leader. Lan Wangji gave his brother a look of gratitude, then continued.

“For political alliances, the Lan sect has looked to build potential military alliances, or gain access to knowledge of another sect. Wei Ying has already shown he is the equivalent of several sects, all on his own.”

Lan Wangji had the same tone and posture as he had when he was reciting lessons back in class in Cloud Recesses. Wei Wuxian had a suspicion that the man actually *was* - taking the Lan sect’s own ridiculous over-regimentation of everything and turning it against them like a blade. He had an almost irresistible urge to climb on Lan Wangji’s lap and kiss him, but he restrained himself.

“Surely you exaggerate, Wangji. Wei Wuxian is a powerful cultivator, but he is still only one man,” the senior elder scoffed.

Lan Wangji’s expression did not outwardly change, but Wei Wuxian could tell he was *pissed* .

“Elder Lan is correct,” Meng Yao spoke, conciliatory. “Wei Wuxian is only one man. Yet in terms of military might, he did more than any single sect did in the war.”

Nie Mingjue snorted. “That kid did more than all of the sects combined. Including mine. Including *yours* ,” he said pointedly at the Lan elders.

There was no argument that could be made against Nie Mingjue’s claim.

Lan Wangji turned to look directly at Wei Wuxian when he next spoke.

“In combat cultivation strength, Wei Ying is the best.”

There was a subtle emphasis on ‘the best’ when Lan Wangji spoke, and Wei Wuxian’s eyes widened slightly when he realized what the man was doing. Their conversation when Lan Wangji declared his intent to court Wei Wuxian played back in his mind.

“Wei Ying says I deserve the best?” Lan Wangji had asked.

“Yes. Only the best for Lan Zhan.”

“Mark your words,” Lan Wangji had stated.

His voice had been laden with an intent that Wei Wuxian was only now understanding. Lan Wangji was not only taking his own sect elders' arguments apart. He was doing the same to Wei Ying. Wei Wuxian was *definitely* getting Lan Wangji out of his robes as soon as he could get him alone.

"But the war is over now," one of the Lan elders was saying, though another one of the elders was looking thoughtful. "Combat strength is only one potential reason for an alliance. One that is less important during times of peace."

"The war is only over because Wei-xiong won it," Nie Huaisang murmured, seemingly to himself, but his words could be heard throughout the room.

Lan Wangji inclined his head in clear agreement with Nie Huaisang.

"Wei Ying has created powerful new talismans, like the ones used against the *Xiangliu.* Invented an entire cultivation approach," Lan Wangji continued.

Wei Wuxian felt his face heat. Lan Wangji couldn't just… he was standing there looking so calm and perfect and beautiful and saying all of these… *things* about Wei Wuxian.

"Lan *Zhan!* You can't say things like that!"

Lan Wangji slanted a look over at him, seeming almost smug with whatever he saw.

"I speak the truth. This one would be lucky to marry Wei Ying."

Wei Wuxian sprawled forward onto the table, laying his head down on the smooth surface, hoping some of its coolness would stop the flaming of his face. Even so, he kept his face turned to the side so he could still see Lan Wangji, unable to take his eyes off the man who was so methodically laying out reason after reason why they should be wed.

Wei Wuxian couldn't take all of these things people were saying about him. He could handle being mocked, insulted, or threatened. He had a lifetime of experience knowing how to deflect, dodge or defend.

He had no experience in how to handle this… this *onslaught* of praise.

"The Jin have been asking for copies of his talismans," Meng Yao said. "Any sect would find themselves at a strategic advantage to have this knowledge available to them."

"Wangji," Lan Xichen said, amusement clear in his expression. "Have you completed making your arguments?"

"No." Lan Wangji paused, looking directly at his elders, his expression implacable. "My final argument is that I *choose* Wei Ying. Want to be with Wei Ying. Want to night hunt with Wei Ying. Want to live with Wei Ying. It can only be Wei Ying."

No one seemed to have expected such an unusually emotional statement from the generally stoic Second Jade.

Eventually the senior elder spoke.

“What does that have to do with anything?”

Lan Xichen turned to look at the man, a frown on his face. Even Lan Qiren looked displeased at the man’s words.

Lan Wangji got the same look he had when Wei Wuxian had seen him playing *weiqi* , when his opponent made a poor move and Lan Wangji knew he had won.

“ *Listen to the wisdom of one’s ancestors,”* Lan Wangji said. The senior elder briefly looked pleased, but Lan Qiren and the other two had a different expression, one that Wei Wuxian was not sure how to interpret. Before he could ask, Lan Wangji was continuing. “This disciple follows the teachings of Lan An. The Lan sect was formed when our ancestor went against the wishes of his order and left his sect in order to be with the person he chose as his life partner. I have chosen Wei Ying. There will be no other.”

Lan Qiren frowned. “Wangji. You cannot force us to accept Wei Wuxian.”

Lan Wangji bowed his head in acknowledgement. “No. This one cannot force his elders to accept Wei Ying. This one only says that he has chosen Wei Ying and will marry Wei Ying.”

“If we don’t accept him, then you will not receive our blessing to marry,” the senior elder said sharply. “We will not permit it.”

“Then this disciple will follow his ancestor’s wisdom, and leave his sect.”

Utter silence greeted these words. The elders looked white with shock, but all Wei Wuxian could think of was how unbearably beautiful Lan Wangji looked, standing calm and steadfast in the face of his sect, his family, and declaring to them his intent to marry Wei Wuxian. It was one thing for Lan Wangji to tell Wei Wuxian he was serious. It was another to watch Lan Wangji stand up to his entire sect for him.

“Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian breathed, standing up to rest his hand on Lan Wangji’s shoulder. He wanted to tell him not to do it, not to give his family up for him. But Lan Wangji did not look the slightest bit conflicted, and the words were already said.

Lan Xichen looked pained and proud at the same time. Lan Qiren looked stricken.

Wei Wuxian drew a slow breath. He couldn’t let Lan Wangji walk away from his family. Even if they couldn't live in Cloud Recesses, even if the Lan’s did not deserve Lan Wangji, it would hurt him to be completely cut off from the home he had grown up in, and people he loved. There had to be some middle ground.

“Sect Leader Lan,” Wei Wuxian said, turning to Lan Xichen and bowing formally. He had at times used less formal greetings for Lan Wangji’s elder brother, but it was important to draw attention to the fact that - despite other Lan elders being present - Lan Xichen was the head of his sect. Ultimately, he would make the final call.

“I love Lan Zhan. I like him, I fancy him. I want to be with him every day. I want to hunt with him, sleep with him, live with him. I will do anything in my power to make him happy, and keep him safe.”

“Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji said, his voice hoarse.

Jiang Cheng looked like he was going to die of embarrassment.

“You acknowledged my help with the Slaughter Tortoise. And with the *Xiangliu.* If I accept banishment, would it not still be possible for Lan Wangji and I to marry? I understand your sect would not tolerate me marrying into the Lan sect. Lan Wangji could marry out, and still be allowed entrance to Cloud Recesses.”

“Marry out!” Lan Qiren exclaimed. “Marry out into *what* ? You’re a rogue cultivator. You have no sect, no family. Nothing to support my nephew.”

“Wei Wuxian is welcome to join the Nie sect,” Nie Mingjue said, repeating his earlier offer. “We would also be happy to welcome Hanguang-Jun into our sect. Neither have violated any of our sect’s principles, and both have contributed significantly to the security and stability of Qinghe.”

“Mingjue,” Lan Xichen said, reprovingly.

Nie Mingjue turned to face his friend, his face firm. “Xichen. I respect your sect, and have always admired its teachings. I sent my younger brother to Cloud Recesses to learn from your elders. But I do not agree with their stance on Wei Wuxian. If GusuLan is not able to accept the amazing good fortune of having two such powerful cultivators join them, then QinghеNie will be more than happy to take them.”

It wasn’t clear if Nie Mingjue meant it as a threat, but the Lan’s relationship with the Nie would suffer if the banishment stood.

“Wei Wuxian could return to the Jiang sect,” Jiang Chen said. “If he goes anywhere, it should be to Lotus Pier.”

Lan Wangji tensed at Jiang Cheng’s words, and Wei Wuxian knew that he was remembering the last time Wei Wuxian had gone to Lotus Pier. Given Madam Yu was still living there, even with her decreased reputation and influence, it was not a place he wanted to raise A-Yuan. They could visit, but it would never be their home.

Lan Xichen sighed, looking over at his elders, then at his brother.

“If Wangji continues to violate our sect's rules, there must be punishment. This has always been the way of our sect. We do not make exceptions,” the senior elder stated. The other elders did not appear to be in agreement, but they held their peace.

Wei Wuxian did not.

“So you would rather have him leave the sect entirely?” Wei Wuxian asked, his voice was dangerously calm. “Lan Zhan has dedicated his life to embodying the Lan sect values. You did not even take time to hear him out before passing judgement. If the Lan sect holds pride above justice, then it does not deserve Lan Zhan.”

“Wei Wuxian!” Lan Qiren snapped.

“No, he’s right,” Jiang Cheng said, crossing his arms belligerently. “What exactly did he do that you disapprove so much about? Find out about the *Xiangliu?* Winning the war with his army? That saved the Lan sect twice. What’s your problem?”

“Cultivation with resentful energy is forbidden,” one of the Lan elders replied. “It does not matter the purpose.”

“Is it?” Lan Xichen asked, earning a shocked look from the elders. “That is not how I have read the statutes. The rule states clearly not to walk the crooked path. And disturbing the peace of the dead is forbidden. But it doesn’t define more specifically about where dealing with resentful energy crosses that line. Yin and Yang energies are a balance in the universe. Yin energy isn’t inherently evil.”

Lan Wangji looked at his brother for a moment, and it seemed as though they were communicating silently for a moment.

Then Lan Xichen continued. “Being aware that resentful energy exists does not violate the rules, nor constitute a crooked path. Our own cultivation methods rely on our ability to detect resentful energy in order to cleanse it. The fact that Wei Wuxian is more sensitive to it is not something he should be punished for, if he does not misuse it. Wangji has said that Wei Wuxian’s ability to sense the location of fierce corpses or resentful spirits more accurately is a significant advantage on night hunts, as it lessens the chance of ambush.”

The senior Lan elder did not look happy, but he was more open to hearing Lan Xichen speak than he had been Lan Wangji.

“As for his ability to communicate with the spirits, it is not dissimilar to Inquiry. And Inquiry calls to the spirits who have passed on, forcing them to respond. Yet our own cultivation methods are not considered evil.”

“Wei Wuxian led an army of undead to march to war for him. That is the very definition of disturbing the dead,” Lan Qiren said, though his tone was less angry and more as though he were exploring an academic issue of interest.

“The spirits of the Burial Mounds were already resentful. Wei Ying granted them their wish and then laid them to rest,” Lan Wangji responded.

Lan Qiren hummed thoughtfully, and did not offer disagreement.

“Not to mention that it was war. Many acts that are forbidden during peacetime are allowed during war,” Lan Xichen said.

The senior elder did not seem particularly appeased by any of this, but Lan Qiren stroked his beard, looking thoughtful.

“Perhaps,” Lan Qiren allowed. “But you cannot convince me that he simply invented this method of cultivation at the start of the war. Wei Wuxian was speaking of this so-called ‘fourth method’ to subduing resentful spirits way back when he was a student at Cloud Recesses. Manipulating the dead on such a mass level would take time to cultivate. And that act of cultivation was a choice, one that deviated from the correct path.”

“What if it wasn’t a choice?” Lan Wangji said.

Wei Wuxian flinched. He did not want to bare his worst memory to a bunch of judgemental assholes who were not likely to be swayed either way. But if Lan Wangji asked him to, he would.

“Everything is a choice! There is always a choice. The rules are not there for convenience. They are there to be followed without exception,” the senior elder said with surety.

“So if Cloud Recesses was invaded, then the disciples would simply stand and let themselves be slaughtered, since killing is prohibited in Cloud Recesses? If a building is on fire, they would not run to flee the flames nor to get help to douse the fires.” Jiang Cheng snapped.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Of course not. But this is something entirely different. Developing an entire cultivation method takes *years* , It isn’t the sort of thing that is done spur of the moment, for survival,” the senior Lan elder said. “If one murders a stranger in a fit of rage, and then later discovers that the person the killed was a murderer themselves and condemned to death, it does not absolve them from the initial act. Since that act was performed without the knowledge of its outcome, it is still equally murder. The ends cannot be used to justify the means.”

“Wei Ying developed the ability to cultivate resentful energy after being thrown into the Burial Mounds. There was no choice,” Lan Wangji stated, his voice grim.

All eyes shifted to Wei Wuxian. Wei Wuxian tilted his head to the side, giving a twisted smile, not really sure how to respond.

“You’re right that it wasn’t developed overnight. It took three months.”

“Impossible!” The senior elder said.

Lan Qiren frowned.

“The issue seems to be whether Wei Wuxian chose to cultivate the ghost path, or had it forced upon him,” Meng Yao said, looking around the room. “Is that correct? All of the other charges against him seem to have been resolved.”

Lan Qiren exchanged a look with the other Lan elders, then gave a sharp nod.

“It’s too bad that there isn’t a way to know for sure,” Nie Huaisang said, innocently, from behind his fan. “It seems as though the Lan elders don’t believe it was possible for it to have happened in the Burial Mounds by force, rather than by choice over a longer period of time.”

Wei Wuxian looked sharply over to his friend, but Nie Huaisang was fluttering his fan looking mildly distressed. Wei Wuxian wasn’t buying it, and was definitely *not* surprised when Meng Yao picked up the thread.

“There are various techniques that would allow someone to see Wei Wuxian’s memories. Empathy, for one.”

“Ridiculous!” The senior elder said. “Those techniques are rarely used for a reason. They are exceptionally dangerous, leaving both parties’ minds vulnerable to corruption, as well as qi

deviation."

Nie Mingjue shifted. "If I felt strongly enough to banish my heir over an issue, then I would feel strongly enough to use every resource to ensure I was making the right fucking call. Even if it put me at risk."

The Lan elders did not look pleased, but Lan Xichen gave a slow nod.

"Agreed, Mingjue. Very well. If Wei Wuxian consents, I will perform Empathy on him to determine whether or not he had a choice in developing demonic cultivation."

"No," Lan Qiren said. Wei Wuxian assumed that the man was going to object because he had already made up his mind, and was therefore surprised by his next words. "Xichen, you are not the one who is skeptical. I know you support Wangji. Since the Elders and I are the ones who take issue with him, we are the ones who should bear the risk. I will be the one to perform Empathy."

"Qiren, this is too risky," the senior elder said.

"One of us needs to. I will take the risk, but my word will then be final." The elders exchanged a look between them, then nodded in agreement.

Lan Wangji narrowed his eyes at Nie Huaisang, then turned to Wei Wuxian.

"No. My sect has no right to demand this of Wei Ying."

Wei Wuxian didn't need to think about it.

"Lan Zhan. If it means I'll get to be with you, I'll do it."

Lan Wangji stepped forward, sliding his hand along Wei Wuxian's jaw, and brushing his thumb along the ridge of Wei Wuxian's cheek bone.

He looked up to glare at his elders. "If anything happens to Wei Ying, this disciple will leave the sect."

Lan Qiren looked grim, but nodded.

It was agreed that Wen Qing would be present, as Wei Wuxian's physician. One of the other Lan elders was a medical cultivator, and he would be monitoring Lan Qiren. Jiang Cheng would use the Jiang bell to break the link if either party became in physical danger.

No one seemed happy that it had come to this, but there had been no other solution.

Wen Qing and the elder Lan medical cultivator stood on either side of Wei Wuxian and Lan Qiren as they sat facing each other on the floor.

"I strongly advise against this, Qiren," the elder repeated, frowning.

Lan Qiren glared at the man. "If you aren't going to be helpful, then you may go and meditate quietly in your quarters."

The elder huffed, but his lips curved into a somewhat fond smile. “You always did too much for those boys.”

“They are my nephews. Nothing is too much.”

Wei Wuxian locked eyes with Lan Qiren, and realized that they had one point upon which they both emphatically agreed. Nothing was too much to risk for Lan Wangji. Lan Qiren gave a small nod in acknowledgement, and Wei Wuxian had no idea what to do with that.

“Right. Let’s do this. Jiang Cheng, are you ready?”

Jiang Cheng scoffed. “Of course I’m ready. I’m not the one risking my spiritual cognition to prove a fucking point.”

“We’ll be fine. Wen Qing is here. Lan Zhan is here. You’re here. It’s fine.” Wei Wuxian said, turning his attention back to Lan Qiren. “Ok, let’s get started,”

It was a risk, letting someone enter his mind. Especially someone who neither liked nor trusted him. Lan Qiren could do damage to Wei Wuxian, if he chose. Wei Wuxian’s agreement to allow Lan Qiren to initiate the link meant he would be the one with the power. Given that he had agreed with the elders who wanted Wei Wuxian punished, he could disable or even kill him now. Lan Wangji’s protective hovering and harsh glares at his elders clearly indicated he was thinking along similar lines.

Lan Qiren did not flinch from Wei Wuxian’s gaze.

“You are familiar with this technique. You know the risks,” Lan Qiren said. It was both a statement and a question.

“Yeah. I’m aware.”

Lan Qiren’s expression didn’t exactly soften, but there was something like approval in his eyes.

“Then we will begin.”

“It won’t be pleasant,” Wei Wuxian warned.

“Yes. I am aware,” Lan Qiren replied, mimicking his initial response.

Surprisingly, Wei Wuxian found himself breathing out a chuckle.

Lan Qiren placed his hands on either side of Wei Wuxian’s head. There was a slow tingle where the man’s qi began to flow, entering Wei Wuxian’s mind.

The noises of the room began to fade, and Wei Wuxian felt the moment that Lan Qiren fully entered his mind. There was a sharp pressure, and suddenly Wei Wuxian didn’t have full control of his memories anymore.

Show me , Lan Qiren’s voice said, inside his head. *Show me you are worthy of my nephew.*

I’m not worthy, though , Wei Wuxian thought reflexively, images of Lan Wangji flickering through even though this was not what Lan Qiren had actually been asking for.

Lan Zhan glowing as he meditated in the early morning light in the cave.

Lan Zhan, silent and pristine, reading quietly in the library,

Lan Zhan, full of graceful power as he practiced sword forms.

Lan Zhan, patient and calm, as he taught the small Lan disciple in the library.

Lan Qiren's voice in his head cut through the disjointed images.

Hmph. Do not get distracted, Wei Wuxian. Show me what I need to see.

Wei Wuxian drew a slow breath, trying to get control over his thoughts, but it was like trying to catch a ball with just the tips of his fingers able to skim it. Memories continued to kaleidoscope, and he was dimly aware of Lan Qiren's presence and subtle reaction as they flowed past.

The battle with the Slaughter Tortoise. He could sense Lan Qiren's concern and underlying pride in Lan Wangji's actions, and a general sort of approval for Wei Wuxian's determination to make sure Lan Wangji came out alive.

The battle with the Xiangliu. The feeling he got from Lan Qiren as the memories of the battle flickered past were a combination of intrigued and horrified, but the images of A-Yuan and the fierce desperation to save the child brought a different sort of acknowledgement from him.

Wen Chao and his men finding Wei Wuxian alone. There was clear disgust from Lan Qiren on this, and a resonance with Wei Wuxian's own anger towards the man.

The fall, sending the butterfly to Lan Zhan. Wei Wuxian clenched down on the fear he had, forcing his mind to stop its fastforwarding of memories and go deep into the Burial Mounds

Image after image slammed into their combined consciousness. The voices. The darkness, the feel of resentment snaking over his skin, into his lungs, entering his mind.

The terror and pain and desperation surged, both in him and in Lan Qiren. He was aware of screaming, and wasn't sure if it was from his own throat or Lan Qiren's.

Wei Wuxian had lost consciousness so many times during the three months he had been in the Burial Mounds that he wasn't sure when he passed out in his memories and when it happened in real life. He could distantly hear people shouting, the frantic chime of a bell, and Lan Wangji's urgent words that seemed to flow around him but he couldn't quite grasp.

And then there was nothing but silence and darkness.

To be continued…

Chapter 43: Political affiliations

A/N - We finally made it to the end of the fic, though this is just the first half of the final chapter because I am being weird about a small part of one of the final scenes but I want it to be right. Thank you to ZazGeek for beta-ing this VERY LONG chapter at the end of a VERY LONG fic. I am splitting it into 2 parts because there is a section in the second half that I just can't get right and it is making myself crazy but I don't want to leave that cliffhanger I posted before for too long LOL. So the next part will HOPEFULLY be up tomorrow. It is a holiday tomorrow for me, so I should (?) be able to get it posted. I will also be catching up on replying to the comments on the last chapter. It was great to hear where people were seeking closure, and definitely encouraged me to get this part up sooner!

The only content warning for this chapter is PTSD triggers, but it isn't super bad compared to the rest of the fic. The NEXT part of this chapter will have a LOT of content warnings, but the good kind. ;)

Shadowy images of the Burial Mounds twisted through Wei Wuxian's consciousness: The massive piles of the bones of those abandoned there. The scent of decay. The gritty feel of grave soil, cold against his skin. The voices of the dead in his head.

The clawing fear and hunger that drove him to (over?) the edge of madness.

Wei Wuxian slowly became aware of the cool, smooth feel of Lan Wangji's qi gently moving through his meridians. It was not a massive flood, more of a steady, narrow stream. He sighed into it, wondering at how something so cool could make his whole body feel so warm.

The subtle, clean scent of sandalwood wrapped around his senses like a blanket. He could feel a warm, living hand stroking gently through his hair.

He was not in the Burial Mounds

The memory of the nightmare still lurked, dark and coiled, in the back of his mind, but it began to sink back down, pushed away as the comforting feel of Lan Wangji's qi, scent, and touch took control of his senses.

He was safe.

His mind felt sluggish and muddy. He couldn't quite remember why he might not be safe, why the Burial Mounds were looming so close in his consciousness, but feeling Lan Zhan's qi was enough for the moment.

He floated on the sensation, wishing he could curl his body around it. That was when he slowly realized he couldn't move.

"Lan Zhan?" he tried to ask… thought he asked. But there was no sound. His throat felt raw and shredded. In his muzzy state, it was hard to tell what were thoughts and what were words, but evidently he was not able to make sounds.

The flow of qi seemed to increase, but then steadied back down into the rate it had been at before. Wei Wuxian wondered if maybe he was not awake yet, and was just dreaming of Lan Zhan.

Lan Zhan is so good. His qi feels so good, moving through my body.

Wei Wuxian drew another contented breath, ignoring the pain in his throat. The warm scent of sandalwood flowed into him, and Wei Wuxian felt his lips curve into a smile.

Lan Zhan smells so good. If I could move, I would curl into him. Burrow inside his robes and curl against the smooth skin of his chest. Bury my face in his neck, curled warm and close against his body.

The flow of qi into him seemed to almost shiver at his thoughts.

I wonder if Lan Zhan can hear what I'm thinking. Wait, why can't I hear anything? If he's so close I should be able to hear his breathing and his heartbeat. I can't see, either, in this dream. I wonder if I can taste? I wonder what Lan Zhan's skin would taste like?

The qi flowing into him stuttered, and didn't quite manage to stabilize the way it had before.

The thought of running his tongue along Lan Zhan's skin made Wei Wuxian suddenly remember things he'd read in books Nie Huaisang had smuggled in for them to read back in Cloud Recesses. Images of all the parts of Lan Wangji's body that he could put into his mouth that he had not yet had the opportunity to flashed through his mind. This was an extremely serious oversight that needed to be rectified immediately. As soon as he could see and move.

I want to suck Lan Zhan's -

His words (thoughts?) were cut off at the feel of a needle aggressively jabbing into his flesh at the base of his skull and another at the side of his brow.

"- the fuck are you doing, talking about shit like that!"

The unmistakable bellow of Jiang Cheng assaulted his ears as though someone had opened a door, except there was no sound of a door actually opening. Somewhat disoriented, Wei Wuxian realized that he could now hear all sorts of other ambient sounds. He could also see the edges of light through his closed eyes. A warm hand gripped his wrist at the point where Lan Wangji's qi was entering his body, and another large hand gently cupped the nape of his neck, holding his head steady.

He tuned out the other voices around him, focusing on trying to open his eyes.

"Lan Zhan?" he managed, this time able to hear his own voice, though the words sounded slurred to his own ears.

"Wei Ying. I am here."

"I can't see you," Wei Wuxian rasped, grimacing at the rawness of his throat.

“Your eyes are closed,” Wen Qing’s voice snapped. “And you’re in a room full of people. Keep your thoughts about your betrothed to yourself.”

Wei Wuxian wondered how they all knew what he’d been thinking about, but he didn’t really care.

“Lan Zhan is going to be my husband. I’m allowed to think about him,” Wei Wuxian slurred out.

He finally managed to open his eyes, and saw Lan Wangji sitting by his bedside, looking at him with his beautiful, golden eyes. The intensity of the focus in them made Wei Wuxian’s heart feel like it was trying to beat upside-down and sideways.

“Mm. Wei Ying can do as he likes,” Lan Wangji agreed.

“He doesn’t need to fucking *say it outloud* !”

An angry swirl of purple appeared in Wei Wuxian’s peripheral vision, indicating the presence of Jiang Cheng.

Wei Wuxian blinked as he processed his words. “I was talking?”

“Mm,” Lan Wangji agreed.

“Yes! You were fucking talking! Next time, keep that shit to yourself! Or at least for when I’m not here!”

“Huh,” Wei Wuxian replied, not feeling particularly bad about it despite Jiang Cheng’s continued angry muttering. He was used to the man’s bluster, and knew that Jiang Cheng always did better with stressful situations if he had something to yell about. “I thought I was dreaming because I couldn’t hear or see anything.”

“Your mind was protecting itself,” Wen Qing explained, briskly. “The memories of the Burial Mounds you relived during Empathy retriggered your initial trauma. You’ve been unconscious for nearly a day. Your qi sealed your senses while your mind stabilized.”

“My throat hurts,” Wei Wuxian said, still trying to process what was going on with his mind and body.

“That’s because you were screaming when you linked with Lan Qiren,” Jiang Cheng snapped, sounding angry in the way he always did when he was worried. “Lan Qiren was as well. It was… it was bad. A-Jie went to make some soup and soft steam buns in case you woke up. Your throat is fucked but you haven’t eaten in over a day.”

“Is Lan Qiren ok?” Wei Wuxian asked. He couldn’t honestly say he liked the man, but he was as close to a father figure as Lan Wangji had ever known, and he did not wish him ill.

There was a brief pause, which told Wei Wuxian that the man was not ok.

Lan Wangji was the one who replied.

“Uncle went into qi deviation. The other elders and one of the Nie healers are working to stabilize him. He has been sedated and his qi sealed to prevent further damage.”

“Lan Zhan. I’m sorry. I knew it would be rough but I didn’t think… I didn’t know…”

“It is not Wei Ying’s fault. Uncle knew the risks and agreed,” Lan Wangji said, though his voice was tense.

“I have given them some of the qi soothing tea to use that my family has developed. It will help mitigate the effects of the deviation and help Lan Qiren recover sooner,” Wen Qing said, taking the wrist Lan Wangji was not holding and assessing Wei Wuxian’s qi.

Wei Wuxian closed his eyes. He was sure that the Lan elders would blame him for this. And rightly so. He should have known better than to give up full control. If he had guided Lan Qiren through the memories, he could have shielded the man, pulled back when he knew they were going to get particularly bad.

And the whole thing might have been for nothing if Lan Qiren was still not recovered, then that meant that he would not be able to issue his verdict on whether the Lan sect would still condemn Wei Wuxian for developing demonic cultivation. It felt crass, though, to ask about his own personal situation when the man might be struggling for his life. He wondered if the other Lan elders would blame him for that, too. In fact, he was somewhat surprised that they hadn’t already.

As though reading his thoughts, Lan Wangji spoke.

“Uncle regained consciousness at times. The Elders asked if Wei Ying attacked him. Uncle said no.”

“They weren’t happy with the answer, but Lan Qiren was clear about that, even if he hasn’t been able to speak much,” Wen Qing said. “They were also unhappy when he said the banishment would be lifted.”

Wei Wuxian’s eyes widened. He had tried very hard not to get his hopes up.

“Uncle was not able to explain. But Uncle was clear.”

“The elders will accept that?” Wei Wuxian asked.

Jiang Cheng scoffed. “They fucking better, after what they put you through. They hate it. All three of them looked like they had quail’s eggs stuck in their throats. But they made the deal before this happened to abide by Lan Qiren’s decision. They can’t go back on it now, especially not when he almost died to see it through.”

Wei Wuxian looked down. He hadn’t intended to injure Lan Qiren by agreeing. Wei Wuxian knew the risks of Empathy, but he’d used it himself countless times and never had anything like what Lan Qiren appeared to be suffering.

“I’m sorry,” Wei Wuxian said quietly.

Jiang Cheng made a noise of disagreement, but Wen Qing cut him off.

“Wei Wuxian. Lan Qiren is the one who chose to initiate it. It was the Lan elders who caused this entire situation to become necessary. If anyone is owed an apology, it is you. Anyone who

saw the change in you before and after the Burial Mounds would have realized that something terrible happened to you during that time. It wasn't just himself that he put at risk. You were also on the verge of qi deviation."

Wei Wuxian flinched, turning his face into the pillow. Lan Wangji's fingers carded through his hair in a soothing rhythm. Lan Wangji's face was hard, and Wei Wuxian wasn't sure if he was angry at his elders for forcing the situation or at Wen Qing for speaking so harshly about them when his uncle was unwell.

"If the Lan elders wanted to judge a situation like that and would not take you at your word, then that was their choice. Lan Qiren cared enough about the wellbeing of his nephew to make sure," Wen Qing allowed, though her voice still held an edge of anger to it and it was clear that she was not happy that Wei Wuxian had been put through what he had. "He will recover. But he will now have the memories of those three months to carry with him as his penance for acting so rashly."

Wei Wuxian's eyes flared open as a thought struck him. "Wait. Since Lan Qiren experienced what I experienced, then… he now knows almost as much about cultivating with resentful energy as I do."

Lan Wangji's hand froze in its movements, as the bizarre truthfulness of that statement sunk in.

"Yeah, he's probably not going to be happy with that when he realizes he's now the second most advanced demonic cultivator," Jiang Cheng said.

"Wei Ying needs rest," Lan Wangji stated, cutting off further conversation.

"Not until he eats," Jiang Yanli said as she entered the room, carrying a tray with a large, steaming toureen of soup. A servant followed her with a tray containing bowls, and plates of soft steam buns that smelled delicious and reminded Wei Wuxian that he had no idea how long it had been since he'd eaten.

Wen Yuan darted in behind her, dashing around her to climb onto the bed next to Wei Wuxian.

"Baba!" Wen Yuan said, happily, curing his little body to nestle against Wei Wuxian's.

Wei Wuxian's breath caught. He looked down at the top of the boy's head, automatically moving an arm to curl around the child. There had been many nights when A-Yuan had woken from a bad dream and climbed into Wei Wuxian's bed for comfort.

But he had never called him 'Baba'.

"A-Yuan," Wei Wuxian murmured, his chest feeling tight with the wave of protectiveness and emotion for the child that swamped him. He loved this child so completely. He would do anything to protect him. He looked up at Wen Qing, who gave a small smile of approval. "Baba's here."

Jiang Cheng's eyes looked suspiciously bright before he gruffly turned away. Jiang Yanli cooed, a soft smile on her face that indicated that she was less surprised than the others.

Lan Wangji's face was filled with a look of yearning and softness that made Wei Wuxian's breath catch in his throat. Lan Qiren might not have given his full blessing, but he had removed

the largest barrier. Any doubts that Wei Wuxian had about whether Lan Wangji truly wanted to be a family with him vanished at the expression on the man's beautiful face as he watched Wei Wuxian with A-Yuan.

"A-Yuan has been a very good boy today in school," Jiang Yanli said, not commenting on the fact that Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji had eyes only for each other. "He was feeling anxious about you, and one of the other children told him that he heard that A-Yuan's baba was very strong and powerful, so he should not worry. I told him he could help me make sure you rested and ate your soup properly."

A-Yuan nodded against Wei Wuxian's chest. Wei Wuxian was grateful to whichever child it was who had spoken to A-Yuan, planting the seed of calling Wei Wuxian his baba. It was something that Wei Wuxian would never have asked of the child, but he was overwhelmed with the sense of rightness of it.

'Mm. Baba will eat then we can nap," A-Yuan said definitively, stroking Wei Wuxian's hair with his small hand.

Wei Wuxian brushed a watery smile on the child's forehead.

"That sounds like a good plan, A-Yuan. Lan Zhan, what do you think about joining your husband and son for an afternoon nap?"

Lan Wangji's entire body went completely still and rigid, and Wei Wuxian wondered if maybe he had overstepped. Possibly he had misread the expression on Lan Wangji's face. They hadn't spoken of children at all, and just because Lan Wangji had seemed fond of A-Yuan, it didn't mean he wanted to be his father.

But before Wei Wuxian could open his mouth to play it off as a joke, Lan Wangji's hand moved to settle on the back of A-Yuan's head, his eyes blazing with a fierce hunger as they locked with Wei Wuxian's.

"Yes."

"You're not his husband yet, Wei Wuxian!" Jiang Cheng snapped, his face flushed red in second-hand embarrassment. He had not grown up in a home where affection was shown.

"They are betrothed. Allowances can be made," Jiang Yanli said, giving Lan Wangji a side-eyed look that he acknowledged with a slight nod. She smiled brightly as Wen Yuan began to try to feed Wei Wuxian the soup.

Lan Wangji moved to sit behind Wei Wuxian on the bed, helping him to sit up to avoid it being spilled. No one mentioned that Wei Wuxian did not require help sitting, least of all Wei Wuxian. The Jiang siblings and Wen Qing left to get their own lunch, despite their being obviously enough for all of them in the large toureen Jiang Yanli had brought.

The three of them ate quietly, and Wei Wuxian felt himself smiling widely every time he slipped a bit of food into one of Lan Wangji or Wen Yuan's bowl only to have something placed into his. A-Yuan grew increasingly sleepy, likely a reaction to the stress of the past day, and the warm, safe feeling of the moment. He set his bowl down, then lay on the bed, curling up against Wei Wuxian's side with a contented sigh as his eyes drifted closed.

After clearing away the dishes, Lan Wangji carefully removed his and A-Yuan's outer robes, then laid down next to Wei Wuxian, with A-Yuan nestled between them. The few times Wei Wuxian had ever seen Lan Wangji sleep on night hunts, the man had always lay flat on his back like a corpse. But this time, Lan Wangji had turned to his side, resting an arm over Wei Wuxian that stretched across to also cover A-Yuan.

Lan Wangji looked down at the boy for a moment, a soft curve forming on his lips as he watched him sleep. Wei Wuxian felt his heart swell at the sight. But his breath caught as Lan Wangji lifted his gaze to meet Wei Wuxian's. Lan Wangji lifted his hand, gently tracing his fingers along Wei Wuxian's brow before threading them lightly into his hair.

"Rest, Wei Ying. I am here."

The soft, steadfast words made Wei Wuxian's throat tighten. The terrible memories of the fear and isolation of the Burial Mounds were still fresh in his mind, contrasting sharply with the current moment. Lan Wangji's steady voice and gentle touch grounded him. Wei Wuxian felt a sense of peace and safety in his presence that he was unfamiliar with in his life. Perhaps he had felt it as a small child, but could not remember it.

He wondered if this would be what his life would feel like, married to Lan Zhan.

"What a good husband my Lan Zhan will make," Wei Wuxian said, trying to make the words teasing, but his voice betrayed him, thick with emotion.

Lan Wangji's golden eyes flared with a possessive heat that made Wei Wuxian's breath catch.

"Wei Ying will be my husband," Lan Wangji said, almost as though he could not believe the words as he slid his hand further back through Wei Wuxian's hair, cradling his head in his large hand.

Lan Wangji leaned in slowly, brushing his lips softly across Wei Wuxian's. It was simple, not meant to escalate into anything more. There was no rush, Wei Wuxian realized.

In the past, whenever he spent time with Lan Wangji, it was with the sinking knowledge that - eventually - they would part. Lan Wangji would go back to Gusu and his family and duties, and Wei Wuxian would continue to make his way on his own as a rogue cultivator. Wei Wuxian had greedily soaked up every moment in Lan Wangji's presence, but had been constantly bracing for when their time together would end.

It was odd, now, to lay in bed with Lan Wangji, to feel his gaze upon him, and know that there would be no leave-taking. Their lives were now entwined, and wherever one would go, the other would follow. Wei Wuxian was no longer going to be alone. He would have a husband, and a son.

"Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian choked out softly, feeling his eyes burn.

"I am here," Lan Wangji repeated, stroking his thumb along the right of Wei Wuxian's cheekbone, wiping away the moisture there with infinite tenderness.

It was so soothing to be touched by hands that held such power, yet such caring. Wei Wuxian's eyes had drifted closed, exhaustion catching up with him.

He wished he could stay awake and enjoy the feeling longer, but he knew Lan Wangji would be there when he woke. He fell asleep to the soft sound of his son's breathing, and the feel of Lan Wangji's body solid and warm beside him.

Wei Wuxian woke to the sound of softly spoken voices and the feel of fingers brushing gently across his brow. He took a moment to reorient himself, feeling groggy and hazy with sleep.

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji's voice came softly from right next to him. "I must speak with Brother. I will return."

The thought of Lan Zhan leaving to go speak with his family alone vaporized the fogginess from Wei Wuxian's mind. He opened his eyes, noticing that Nie Huaisang and Lan Xichen were both standing in the doorway.

"I'll come with you," Wei Wuxian said, levering himself up to a half-seated position. Wen Yuan was nowhere to be seen.

"A-Yuan went to play with one of his friends," Lan Wangji said, answering Wei Wuxian's unasked question.

"How long was I sleeping for?"

"A few hours. Uncle is still unwell, but he asked to speak with me before he is sedated again."

Wei Wuxian frowned. "Is Lan Qiren doing better?"

Lan Wangji gave a slight shake of his head. "Uncle will be returning to Cloud Recesses and will enter secluded meditation until his qi restablizes."

Wei Wuxian's grimaced. If Lan Qiren was still processing the memories of the Burial Mounds, it was likely that seeing him would re-trigger everything. "So it was all for nothing. Not only can he not advocate for us, but now he's at risk for even trying."

"It was not for nothing," Lan Xichen's voice came from across the room. "Uncle has lifted the edict forbidding contact with you. However, given his current state, it is probably not advisable that he sees you in person right now."

Wei Wuxian sat up further, but Lan Wangji stood and moved between his brother and Wei Wuxian. Wei Wuxian noticed that - at some point - Lan Wangji must have put his outer robes back on, because the Second Jade of Lan was looking as perfectly put together as always. Wei Wuxian, however, was still just in his inner robes, which were gaping open as he sat up in his sleep-rumpled state.

"Brother. Give me a few moments, then I will come see Uncle."

Wei Wuxian could not see Lan Xichen's face, but he could hear the amusement in his voice.

"Very well, Wangji. I apologize for my intrusion. I had been informed that Wei Wuxian had awoken, but should have realized he would require further rest. However, due to your current status, I would recommend that you come with me while Wei Wuxian dresses."

Lan Wangji hesitated, clearly uncomfortable about leaving Wei Wuxian.

“I can play chaperone if they need a few moments together,” Nie Huaisang offered, stepping forward. “I’ve been meaning to catch up with Wei-xiong and Wangji-xiong for a few days.”

Lan Xichen oddly did not look pleased with this comment, but - as they were in the Nie sect’s hospitality - he could do nothing but incline his head in acceptance.

“Wangji. I will speak with you shortly. I do not know how long Uncle will remain awake and lucid.”

After Lan Xichen left, Nie Huaisang reached into a pouch he had been carrying and pulled out a set of robes in the dark green of the Nie sect.

“I thought you might need a change of clothes,” Nie Huaisang said, laying them out on the table where the privacy screen had been set up to block off the bathing area.

Wei Wuxian opened his mouth to say thank you, but Lan Wangji cut him off.

“I will purchase Wei Ying’s robes if he needs them.”

Lan Wangji’s gaze was hard and cold as it latched onto Nie Huaisang.

“Oh, of course!” Nie Huaisang said, fluttering his fan. “Please accept my apologies. I only thought that it might perhaps be… a good idea for Wei-xiong to be wearing these robes. I have some for A-Yuan as well.”

Nie Huaisang had the outward appearance of seeming flustered and apologetic, but he also was meeting Lan Wangji’s gaze in a way that had a bit of steel to it.

Wei Wuxian was very sure that something was going on, and he was equally sure that he did not know what it was.

Lan Wangji glared down at the Nie robes as though they had personally violated every single Lan sect rule.

Wei Wuxian took in the significance of the robes and realized this gift was not just one for convenience.

“You think I should join the Nie sect,” Wei Wuxian said.

Nie Huaisang fluttered his fan. “No! I’m not saying that. I don’t know. I really don’t know about things like that.”

“Yes you do,” Meng Yao said, stepping into the room. “I just came from bringing food to the Lan elders. They are still arguing about whether to accept Lan Qiren’s order to remove the ban on interacting with Wei Wuxian. Given Lan Xichen’s stance on the matter, they will lose on that front. But they are very far from being willing to give the marriage their blessing. Unless you want to significantly delay the marriage, Wei Wuxian needs to join the Nie sect.”

Wei Wuxian looked from Meng Yao to Lan Wangji.

“How will it help if I join the Nie? That won’t make the Lan elders approve of us.”

“Brother will give us his blessing. The elders will not have to accept the matter if Wei Ying is not marrying in.”

Wei Wuxian wasn’t sure how he felt about that. A sect’s elders needed to approve a marriage of a ranking sect member if it meant adding a member to the sect. If it was simply a matter of the marriage alone, then blessing for that union would be given by the eldest family member. With Lan Qiren unwell, it would fall to Lan Xichen.

They could marry, but it would mean that their marriage was only accepted by Lan Wangji’s family, not his sect.

“Would that mean you would have to leave GusuLan?” Wei Wuxian asked.

He knew that Lan Wangji was willing to - he had made that more than clear. But that almost made it worse. Wei Wuxian did not want Lan Wangji to have to give something that important up for him.

“Not necessarily,” Meng Yao said. “Since the edict around interacting with you has been lifted, Hanguang-Jun is not breaking sect rules by associating with you. If Zewu-Jun blesses the marriage, as both the elder family member as well as the head of the Lan sect, then there should be no issue. Usually, it is the bride who ‘marries out’ of the sect. But since both of you are male, neither of you is required to marry out. If Zewu-Jun agrees, Lan Wangji would stay part of the Lan sect, and you would be part of the Nie sect.”

“But why do I have to join the Nie sect at all, if Lan Xichen has given us his blessing?”

“A-Yuan. And to protect Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji said.

It was true that A-Yuan was happy here. He missed his friend A-Yi from Cloud Recesses, but he was making friends here and settling in. If the elders were going to hold a grudge against Wei Wuxian, he was not sure he would trust them not to take it out on A-Yuan. It was the same reason he didn’t want to bring A-Yuan to Lotus Pier while Madam Yu was still there. They might fear Wei Wuxian, but A-Yuan was only a child. He would be vulnerable, and Madam Yu had already proven she was not above taking her anger out on a child in her care.

Still, the Nie cultivation style was not what he wanted his son to follow, at least not exclusively. He wanted to be able to teach A-Yuan how to cultivate his golden core in the way his mother had taught him. He wanted to be able to share his knowledge of the sword with his son, and have Lan Wangji do the same. And whatever had caught Wen Qing’s concern with the cultivation technique also was something he would need to find out more about before having his child pick it up.

“If I’m an outer disciple with the Nie, will A-Yuan have to learn the saber?” Wei Wuxian asked Nie Huaisang.

Nie Huaisang shuddered. “Not exclusively. Definitely not. I’m the sect heir, and I don’t even want to learn it. A-Yuan will be expected to take class with the other children of the sect to learn

the basic arts, but he can take his training in sword forms from you and Wangji-xiong, if you prefer. Because of some of the challenges with saber cultivation, not every Nie disciple learns it beyond the basic level. Especially not the outer disciples. As long as he learns the rest of the Nie teachings and the basics of our cultivation style, he will be accepted here even if he specializes in other techniques."

Wei Wuxian nodded slowly. "Ok. That works on my side of things. But I don't know why the Nie sect would put up with a disciple and his kid if they're not going to really follow the Nie cultivation path."

"Wei-xiong. Did you not listen to *anything* Wangji-xiong said when he spoke to the elders?" Nie Huaisang asked.

Meng Yao smiled and inclined his head. "It is only a matter of time before the other sects wake up to the fact that having the Yiling Laozu as a friend is much better than having him as an enemy. The Nie are fortuitous enough to have made that realization first."

Wei Wuxian seriously doubted that the other sects would ever see him as anything other than a threat, but he was not stupid enough to turn down a safe home for A-Yuan if it was being offered.

"Ok. I mean, if you are sure Sect Leader Nie is ok with it, then I'm in. A-Yuan needs a home he can grow up in, that's stable. Where he's not going to be judged for who his father is. I guess that rules out Lotus Pier and Cloud Recesses."

"Da ge was the one who told me to pick out the robes," Nie Huaisang replied, giving a nervous look to Lan Wangji.

"Wei Ying also deserves a home that is safe, where he is not judged unfairly," Lan Wangji said, throwing a hard look at Nie Huaisang, but no longer objecting to the robes.

"Ahaha, Lan Zhan! Usually I deserve the judgments I get," Wei Wuxian tried to deflect.

"Wei Ying does not deserve them. You should not have been judged without hearing his side. You should not have been forced to undergo Empathy to satisfy Uncle's doubts."

Both Nie Huaisang and Meng Yao's eyes widened at the uncharacteristic number of words spoken as well as clear anger in Lan Wangji's voice directed at his own sect elders.

"Lan Zhan. I didn't mind. Your uncle cares for you. He has a right to make sure you end up with someone you deserve. I'd do the same thing, if I were him!"

"You would not. You would listen, before judging. The Elders and Uncle are wrong. They do not deserve Wei Ying."

Wei Wuxian sat there, frozen, not even sure what to say. Before he could even make some sort of a joke, Lan Wangji was turning to Nie Huaisang and Meng Yao.

"I must go see Uncle and Brother. I will inform them that you will be now under the Nie sect protection, as will A-Yuan."

Nie Huaisang and Meng Yao returned his bow. Lan Wangji turned back to look at Wei Wuxian, who was still sitting on the bed with his under robes slightly undone. He crouched down and straightened Wei Wuxian's robes to cover his chest properly, then stood.

"I will purchase robes for Wei Ying after I have met with Brother and Uncle."

Wei Wuxian rolled his eyes. "Lan Zhan. These are fine! I don't need so many robes."

Lan Wangji inexplicably glared at Nie Huaisang (who shrank back slightly), then left.

Meng Yao and Nie Huaisang turned exasperated looks on Wei Wuxian when he was gone.

"What? Just because Lan Zhan likes fancy robes doesn't mean I need them!"

Meng Yao sighed.

"I will inform Sect Leader Nie of your agreement to join the Nie sect. After your bath, you can come and speak with him. There are not any specific formalities, but he will give you a saber to learn and you can discuss potential roles for you in the sect."

Meng Yao took his leave, and Nie Huaisang kept him company while Wei Wuxian moved behind the privacy screen to bathe.

He dressed in the robes Nie Huaisang had brought, which were sturdy and of quite a high quality, and wondered why Lan Wangji had been so annoyed with them.

The meeting with Nie Mingjue had gone well, with no pomp or ceremony, as befitted the man and his sect. Wei Wuxian had been gifted a small but good quality saber, and one of the senior disciples would begin teaching him the basics of saber fighting whenever Wei Wuxian had time.

For his duties, he was mainly going to be taking on night hunts, but Nie Mingjue was also interested in ideas Wei Wuxian had about arrays that could notify the Unclean Realm of trouble from longer distances. Some of the more remote villages closer to the Wen border often spent many days waiting for help to arrive, because it took them nearly a week to get their request for help into the hands of someone who could do anything about it.

With the Wen sect now demoted to a minor sect, and most of its cultivators dead, it would fall to the Nie to manage those lands. Wen Ning and Wen Qing were rebuilding the Wen into a small sect focused primarily on medical cultivation. They would require the protection of the Nie, at least in the near term. Wei Wuxian would also be the main point of contact with the Wen siblings to ensure there were no retailations from other sects with the war over.

Wei Wuxian had also noticed that there was something about the Nie cultivation method that had captured Wen Qing's attention. He had found her in the library multiple times looking through scrolls on the Nie ancestors as well as tomes on the sect's cultivation techniques. Nie Huaisang has been sitting with her the last time, his face more serious and focused than Wei Wuxian had ever seen him. Whatever was going on there, it was something that Wen Qing obviously felt was worth her time. Having a new problem to solve would give her a new focus, which would help her settle into her new life as well.

Classes for A-Yuan would continue, and he would move into the children's dorms in a few weeks, once everything was settled. Nie Mingjue had clapped Wei Wuxian on the shoulder, and welcomed him to the sect.

He'd also said, with a smile full of teeth, that if the Lan elders or Madam Yu gave Wei Wuxian any problems, Nie Mingjue would be more than happy to solve them for him. Wei Wuxian had laughed, surprised, but left the meeting feeling more secure about his welcome in his sect than ever had with the Jiang, despite the number of years he had spent there.

He hoped that the Nie sect would allow him to give A-Yuan a more secure childhood than he himself had ever had. He could live with the mistakes that had brought him here if allowed A-Yuan to grow into someone who felt like he was more than just a blade sitting on a sword rack, ready to be used.

To be continued...

Chapter 44: Wangxian - (extremely) married with a son

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A/N - The final chapter!!! We made it. Thanks especially to the readers who kept with me and left comments along the way. Hopefully you all know that you are the real reason long fics like this get completed and not abandoned along the way. Also, a huge thank you to ZazGeek for beta-ing this VERY LONG chapter at the end of a VERY LONG fic.

Content warning - If you don't want to read about sex, stop reading when Lan Wangji slides his thumb into Wei Wuxian's mouth (probably that is an obvious signal?) and don't pick up again until the scene break where it begins "Wei Wuxian knew he was alive, because could feel the rise and fall of Lan Wangji's breaths". See notes for more detailed content warnings (all sexual in nature).

Wei Wuxian returned to his rooms, but quickly felt the space become stifling. Without conversation to distract him, the memories from the Burial Mounds that had been freshly unearthed were making his skin crawl. Lan Wangji's qi was no longer circulating through his system, calming him and keeping the memories of the sights and sounds and scents of the Burial Mounds at bay.

Wei Wuxian decided he needed to get out of the room, somewhere where he could see the sun and feel the fresh air on his face. He needed sensory reminders that he was no longer trapped in the fetid hell where he had lost a part of his mind, and gained parts of the minds of many who had died there.

He walked down the familiar trail to the small clearing he had visited whenever he needed a place to breathe. It was the same spot of the forest he had been when Lan Wangji first returned to the Unclean Realm after Wei Wuxian had arrived, and the memory of Lan Wangji's presence further helped steady him. It could be hours before Lan Wangji was done meeting with his uncle and elders.

The bubbling sound of the small brook soothed him and made it easier to constantly remind himself of where he was. It wasn't as good as having Lan Wangji with him, but Wei Wuxian knew that it would be unreasonable to ask that the man not leave his side until the memories had been pushed back into their boxes inside his mind and put away.

He had no idea how long he'd been sitting there, but the sound of soft footfalls had his eyes opening. Lan Wangji walked into the small clearing, his face unreadable, even for the stoic Second Jade of Lan.

"Lan Zhan?" Wei Wuxian asked, concerned. "Are you okay? What did Lan Qiren say?"

Lan Wangji looked at Wei Wuxian searching his face for several moments without speaking.

"That bad, eh?" Wei Wuxian tried to play it off as a joke, but honestly his insides were twisting at the thought of all the things Lan Qiren could have seen inside Wei Wuxian's head. Maybe he

had told Lan Wangji something that would make him change his mind about marrying him.

“Uncle told me to be careful,” Lan Wangji said, watching Wei Wuxian’s reaction.

Wei Wuxian felt anger flare. After everything, they still thought he was a danger to Lan Zhan? “What the fuck. I’m not going to hurt you, Lan Zhan!”

“Mm. At first, I thought Uncle was implying that as well. Uncle clarified.”

Wei Wuxian would almost have been relieved by Lan Wangji’s words, except Lan Wangji was still looking at him in that same incredibly intense, probing way that was making Wei Wuxian feel unsettled.

“Ok? So, what did he mean, then?”

Lan Wangji’s ears were pink, but his eyes were bold as they pinned Wei Wuxian where he stood.

“Uncle said… that Wei Ying is… exceptionally devoted. To me.”

Wei Wuxian felt his face heat. God, he hoped that Lan Qiren hadn’t caught a glimpse of Wei Wuxian’s memories of what happened after they’d killed the demon.

The fierce possessiveness of the thought he’d had during the battle that the only demon allowed to touch Lan Wangji was Wei Wuxian.

The sight of Lan Wangji’s bare skin in the moonlight, glistening with the water Wei Wuxian had poured on it to clean his wound.

How Lan Wangji’s body had felt, hard, against his.

Wei Wuxian tried to reign his thoughts in to focus on what Lan Wangji had said to him.

“I mean… yes? I wouldn’t agree to marry you if I wasn’t willing to be loyal to you,” Wei Wuxian said, knowing it was a dodge. Knowing that Lan Wangji would know it, also. “I think that’s probably normal?”

Lan Wangji’s expression flickered, and Wei Wuxian realized Lan Wangji liked hearing Wei Wuxian talking about them being married. He remembered the way the man had reacted earlier that day, when he’d called him ‘husband’ for the first time. That was definitely something he would be exploring later.

“Not just loyal. Uncle said Wei Ying’s feelings are. Devotional. Pure. Overwhelming.”

“Ugh. Lan Zhan!” Wei Wuxian felt as though he wished the floor would open up and swallow him. Why would Lan Qiren feel the need to say such things?! The elder Lan had never married. How could he possibly be in a position to judge what was normal or not?

“I mean, who wouldn’t feel that way about Lan Zhan? You are so amazing. But why would he tell you to be careful? Wouldn’t he be happy that I… felt that way?”

Lan Wangji walked towards him, his expression unyielding.

“Uncle said that I must be careful. Because if anything happened to me, Wei Ying would have no limits to avenge me.”

Lan Wangji was standing directly in front of Wei Wuxian, close enough that he could feel the warmth of Lan Wangji’s breath.

Wei Wuxian thought for a moment of what he would do if someone had killed Lan Wangji in the war. Or if someone tried to kill him now. The fierce surge of rage that howled through him even at the idea of it happening caused the shadows around them to stretch and darken dangerously.

“Mm. Lan Zhan should heed his uncle’s advice, and be careful,” Wei Wuxian said, hearing the deadly tone in his own voice but unable to draw it back. He would kill for Lan Wangji, without hesitation. There was no point in trying to hide that fact. Lan Qiren was right - he would be unstoppable.

Lan Wangji lifted his hand, tracing his thumb along the seam of Wei Wuxian’s mouth as his long fingers brushed the sharp line of his jaw.

“Then Wei Ying must also be careful.” Lan Wangji’s words carried an equal promise of violence against anyone who tried to harm Wei Wuxian. Wei Wuxian had grown up being told his purpose was to protect Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli. He was the sword and shield of the Jiang sect, and it was a role he was familiar and comfortable with. He was not used to hearing a reciprocating promise. He wasn’t sure how he felt about it. He did not want Lan Wangji to put himself at risk for him. But the surety of Lan Wangji’s words made Wei Wuxian’s lower belly fill with heat.

“Uncle says I am Wei Ying’s spiritual tether in this world.” Lan Wangji’s gaze dropped to Wei Wuxian’s mouth, his thumb slipping in between Wei Wuxian’s lips. “This one’s thoughts about Wei Ying are not so pure.”

Wei Wuxian recognized the heavy-lidded look in Lan Wangji’s eyes, answering the surge of arousal he felt in his own body. The fact that Wei Wuxian was the only one who could bring it out made a dangerous curl of possessiveness snake through him.

Wei Wuxian’s lips curved into a dark smile.

“Hm. Is Hanguang-Jun having lascivious thoughts about this one?” Wei Wuxian asked. He reached out and trailed on finger lazily along the collar of one of Lan Wangji’s outer robes.

“Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji bit out, a muscle in his jaw clenching in an obvious effort of self-control.

When they were young and Lan Wangji had taken this tone with him, Wei Wuxian had thought it meant that the man was angry and offended by him. Wei Wuxian now realized that this was the sound of Lan Wangji when his restraint was being tested.

Wei Wuxian’s smile widened as he slid his hands slowly, deliberately down to the knot on Lan Wangji’s belt.

“Lan Zhan. Are you not my betrothed? Am I not allowed to show my husband how much I appreciate him?”

Lan Wangji's hand gripped the hilt of *Bichen* so tightly his knuckles turned white. Wei Wuxian wasn't sure if Lan Wangji would draw his sword, or if he just needed something to grip, but either option delighted him.

Wei Wuxian untied the belt and let the pristine white fabric of it fall to the ground. He leaned forward as his hands continued to undo the ties of Lan Wangji's robes. Lan Wangji's body was locked in perfect, rigid posture as Wei Wuxian's lips brushed against the shell of Lan Wangji's ear.

"Your uncle said I worshiped you, right? That this one's feelings for Lan Zhan are 'devotional. Overwhelming'," Wei Wuxian murmured, noticing the slight trace of goosebumps that raised along the side of Lan Wangji's neck. "But, Lan Zhan. They are not always pure."

Wei Wuxian slid one hand down slowly the front of Lan Wangji's robes, pressing the fabric against the smooth planes of Lan Wangji's chest and stomach rather than letting it hang loosely around him. The fall of the silk caught on the thick, jutting outline of Lan Wangji's erection. Wei Wuxian let his hand hover over Lan Wangji's lower dantian, lifting his eyes to meet the burning, golden gaze that was locked on his.

"I think about you. Always want you." Lan Wangji's words rasped out, low and rough, as though torn from his soul like a terrible confession.

"I don't mind if your thoughts are impure, Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian said as he let his hand drift lower, brushing lightly against the hard length of Lan Wangji's dick through the layers of white silk. He remembered the idea that had come to him when he had woken earlier that day to the scent of Lan Wangji and the feel of his qi pushing the nightmare of the Burial Mounds away.

Wei Wuxian pushed the silk robes apart as he sank to his knees at Lan Wangji's feet.

"Let me worship you, Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian breathed, nuzzling his face into the thin fabric of Lan Wangji's pants. The cloth was tented where Lan Wangji's cock strained against it, a wet patch already showing through the thin material.

"Wei *Ying* ."

Lan Wangji fisted Wei Wuxian's hair in his hands, keeping his head from moving. Wei Wuxian let out a low sound deep in his throat, loving the slight edge of pain in the strong grip, reminding him of Lan Wangji's power and restraint. And how Wei Ying could make him lose the latter.

"Show me, Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian said, untying the white silk pants and pulling them down, freeing Lan Wangji's erection to his hungry gaze. It hung full and heavy between Lan Wangji's strong thighs. There was already a pearl of precum at its tip. Wei Wuxian could not wait to taste it. "Show me the things you think about doing to your Wei Ying."

Lan Wangji let out a sound like the air had been punched out of him. Wei Wuxian looked up at him through heavily lidded eyes, as he gripped the man's dick. He traced around the tip of it with his tongue, not taking his eyes off Lan Wangji's face. A shudder rippled over the Second Jade of Lan's frame, his eyes closing in a slow blink.

He was so close to breaking, and Wei Wuxian could not wait to see it. He brushed his lips over the head of Lan Wangji's cock as he murmured. "Show me, Lan Zhan. And I will show you how

your Wei Ying worships his Lan Zhan."

Lan Wangji's hands tightened painfully in Wei Wuxian's hair.

"Mark your words," he said darkly, before roughly sliding his hands forward to press harshly into the hinge of Wei Wuxian's jaw on either side, forcing it open.

Wei Wuxian groaned as Lan Wangji thrust his hips forward, pushing his dick between Wei Wuxian's parted lips and pressing into his mouth. Wei Wuxian opened as wide as he could to accommodate its thick girth. He might not have had experience in the act, but Wei Wuxian was nothing if not a quick learner. If he could figure out how to invent a chain lightning talisman, he would figure out how to properly suck Lan Zhan's dick.

The salty, bitter taste of Lan Zhan on his tongue blended with the scent of sandalwood and musk, and Wei Wuxian did not think he'd ever loved anything more. The taste of Lan Zhan was an intimate knowledge that no one else had. That no one else would ever have. It was only for Wei Ying, and he reveled in that knowledge.

Lan Wangji's face was rapt and focused as he watched Wei Wuxian on his knees, taking him into his mouth.

Wei Wuxian struggled a bit to take more of Lan Wangji's formidable length in his mouth, and realized that - next time - he should lick it first to get it wet to make it slide better. Wei Wuxian worked his tongue over and around the part of Lan Wangji's cock that he'd managed so far, until his mouth was able to produce enough moisture to take more in.

It was messy and slow, and Wei Wuxian loved every second of it.

Lan Wangji's lips were parted, his eyes half closed as he stared down at Wei Wuxian with a hunger that made Wei Wuxian smile around his dick even as drool dribbled down his chin. Lan Wangji gripped his hair harder, moving his hips and pressing deeper into Wei Wuxian's mouth. When it hit the back of his throat, Wei Wuxian fought the urge to cough, determined to take more of Lan Wangji's cock. He wanted to take all of it, but wasn't sure he'd manage in his first attempt.

Based on the mesmerized expression on Lan Wangji's face, he would be more than happy to help Wei Wuxian practice in the future.

Wei Wuxian's eyes watered with the pressure to try to breathe, to try not to choke. He loved it, loved the aching burn of his jaw, the pressure in his lungs, the feel of his throat constricting around Lan Wangji's velvet-hard flesh. He wanted Lan Wangji to use him, to fuck his mouth, to make him choke and still take more.

He arched his back, gripping his hands into the fabric of Lan Wangji's robes as they hung loosely at his sides, giving up all control over the pace and depth of Lan Wangji's thrusts. He hoped Lan Wangji got the message of what he wanted.

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji gritted his teeth as he pulled out slightly, then pushed back in harshly.

Wei Wuxian choked, and groaned in earnest at the feel of Lan Wangji's movements as his hips snapped forward with increasing force. Lan Wangji's eyes burned brighter, fixed on Wei

Wuxian's face as though there was nothing else in the world worth looking at.

Lan Wangji shifted his grip so he was fully supporting Wei Wuxian's head, tipping him back and forcing Wei Wuxian to arch even more until he felt like he might fall over backward if Lan Wangji let go.

Lan Wangji did not let go.

He gripped Wei Wuxian tighter and fucked even faster and deeper into his mouth with a fierce intensity that had tears running down Wei Wuxian's face as he tried to swallow, tried to breath. All he could do was grip the silk robes and open wider, letting Lan Wangji use his mouth.

It was the best thing he'd ever felt.

He wanted to tell Lan Zhan how much he loved it. The burn in his jaw. The trembling in his thighs as he balanced on his knees his back arched as Lan Wangji pushed him to lean back further, with Lan Wangji's strength the only thing holding him up.

"Wei Ying. Wei Ying. Wei Ying," Lan Wangji said his name like a mantra, his hands never loosening in their tight grip on Wei Wuxian's hair, holding him in place.

Lan Wangji's eyes were locked on Wei Wuxian's mouth, watching his dick slide in and out between Wei Wuxian's red, swollen lips with an unholy fascination that made Wei Ying's entire being shiver in response. Lan Wangji's thrusts began to lose their rhythm, and Wei Wuxian reached out to grab at Lan Wangji's hips to keep him from pulling out.

Lan Wangji's mouth opened in a harsh breath, his eyes unblinking as he stared down at Wei Wuxian and came, flooding Wei Wuxian's mouth with his cum. Lan Wangji's qi speared into him even deeper than his cock did, jolting Wei Wuxian with an almost unbearable spike of pleasure. He felt his own qi surge up in response, pushing into Lan Wangji as cum and spit dribbled down his chin where he couldn't swallow fast enough to keep up with the flow.

Lan Wangji watched hungrily as he traced the line of the droplets with his eyes. His dick seemed to swell even more, pulsing endlessly in Wei Wuxian's throat. Wei Wuxian swallowed messily, his mouth stretched wide on Lan Wangji's cock.

Lan Wangji gave a shuddering breath as the last of his orgasm rippled through him, then slowly pulled out of Wei Wuxian's mouth. He reverently cupped Wei Wuxian's head as he sank to his knees and kissed him, licking deep into Wei Wuxian's mouth as Wei Wuxian gasped for breath.

Wei Wuxian's lips were stretched and sore, and he let Lan Wangji control the kiss as he was pulled firmly onto Lan Wangji's lap like it was the only place he belonged.

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji breathed, his voice soft and reverential.

He slid his large hand up under Wei Wuxian's robes, closing around Wei Wuxian's neglected erection through the thin linen of his pants.

Wei Wuxian sucked in a sharp breath, having forgotten about his own pleasure, being so focused on Lan Wangji's.

“Lan Zhan,” he slurred, not able to form words properly as he let Lan Wangji lay him down in the soft grass, untying Wei Wuxian’s pants and pushing them down to free his cock.

Wei Wuxian wanted to watch what Lan Wangji’s hand was doing to his body, but he couldn’t take his eyes from his lover’s face. Lan Wangji’s expression was one that Wei Wuxian never wanted to forget for the rest of his life. He wanted to see it every day, possessive and full of wonder and burning with lust for Wei Ying all at the same time.

While one hand worked Wei Wuxian’s cock, the other slid up along his throat and jaw to gently trace Wei Wuxian’s swollen lower lip with his thumb. Wei Wuxian gasped at how overly sensitized his mouth felt, and Lan Wangji’s eyes darkened at the sight.

“Lan Zhan is so beautiful,” Wei Wuxian mumbled, his eyes losing focus at the flood of pleasure Lan Wangji was creating in his body.

“Wei Ying is beautiful,” Lan Wangji said. “So beautiful like this. Mouth swollen from my cock. Lips slick with my cum.”

Wei Wuxian’s brain short-circuited at the sound of the filthy words leaving Lan Wangji’s perfect mouth.

“Lan Zhaaan!”

Before he even had a chance to make his brain form words for some sort of reply other than Lan Zhan’s name, Lan Wangji was leaning down and kissing Wei Wuxian fiercely as his hand moved faster on Wei Wuxian’s dick.

Wei Wuxian wondered if it were possible for a body to cease to exist due to sensory overload. It was too much pleasure. The sight, the scent, the feel of Lan Wangji was flooding through every pore in Wei Wuxian’s body and he didn’t know if he would be able to survive it.

He had been leaking precum for a while, and the slick sounds of flesh moving over flesh competed with the murmuring babble of the small brook nearby. Wei Wuxian’s eyes closed of their own accord as he felt his orgasm wash through him, spilling over Lan Wangji’s hand. Lan Wangji continued to stroke Wei Wuxian until the last tremor had finished, but he didn’t release Wei Wuxian. He lay down beside him in the grass, his large hand still gently holding Wei Wuxian’s softening cock, his other hand moving softly over Wei Wuxian’s hair.

He wasn’t sure how long they drifted in that contented state, but after a while, Wei Wuxian felt tension start to creep into Lan Wangji’s movements. The hand on his dick was withdrawn, and then Lan Wangji was sitting up beside him.

“Wei Ying.” There was a strange note in Lan Wangji’s voice, at odds with the peaceful moment.

Wei Wuxian forced his eyes to open, despite the fact that he would have happily drifted in that half-asleep, sated state indefinitely. Lan Wangji was looking at him intently, a slight furrow in between his brows that indicated he was truly upset about something. His usually pristine robes hung loosely over his shoulders, baring a swath of his smooth, hard chest.

“Lan Zhan. What’s wrong?”

Lan Wangji looked away, off over towards the brook.

“I was too rough with Wei Ying. I was too… this one has broken the rules and apologizes to Wei Ying.”

The words were at such dissonance with the emotions Wei Wuxian had been feeling that he was momentarily frozen. When Lan Wangji shifted to kneel and bowed, Wei Wuxian rolled to his knees and bent down low to grip his arms and lift him back up.

“Wait. Lan Zhan! Stop. What’s going on? You weren’t too rough with me. I told you before that I liked it. You haven’t broken any rules.”

They knelt, facing each other, Wei Wuxian’s hands gripping Lan Wangj’s forearms in the early evening light that filtered through the trees surrounding them.

Lan Wangji’s lips compressed, his expression going prim and tight in the way Wei Wuxian had come to associate with him reciting his sect’s rules, which had been relentlessly drilled into both Jades of Lan since infancy. His instinct was proven correct with Lan Wangji’s next words.

“*Do not indulge in debauchery. Do not indulge in excessive pleasure. Promiscuity is forbidden. Excessive lust is forbidden. Do not let pleasure overcome your mind. Do not exult in excess*.”

At the last one, Wei Wuxian laughed. “Were you exulting excessively over getting to fuck this one’s mouth, Lan Zhan?”

He let go of Lan Wangji’s arms, and took the man’s face fondly in his hands, forcing him to look at him instead of over his shoulder.

“Lan Zhan. Baobei. Listen to me. There was nothing wrong in what we just did. We are betrothed. We are meant to dual cultivate together. Being together physically is not debauchery. And I don’t think promiscuity counts if you only do it with your husband. You’re not thinking of doing this with other people, are you, Lan Zhan?”

Lan Wangji’s lips tightened. “Ridiculous.”

“Good. Because I’m not either.”

Lan Wangji’s eyes flared, his hands shooting out to grip Wei Wuxian’s hips possessively, bringing their bodies flush together where they knelt in the grass. Wei Wuxian’s pants were still loose around his thighs from their earlier activities, and the suggestiveness of their position had his dick stirring again, shifting against his inner robe.

“No others,” Lan Wangji said firmly.

Gods, Wei Wuxian loved him so much. He laughed, leaning in to brush a kiss against Lan Wangji’s stern mouth, his hands still cupping the man’s beautiful face.

“No others,” Wei Wuxian agreed. “This one is only for Lan Zhan. Now, what were those other rules you were so worried about? Feeling excessive lust and pleasure? Lan Zhan, who is to say what is excessive, and what is the right amount? You’re not letting your lust lead you to do something wrong. I think that means it’s not excessive.”

Lan Wangji looked away, though he didn't drop his hands from where they rested on the swell of Wei Wuxian's hips. "I was rough with Wei Ying."

"And I *liked* it, Lan Zhan!" Wei Wuxian gripped Lan Wangji's shoulders, giving him a tiny shake. "How many times do I have to say it for you to believe it? When you're rough with me, then I know you mean it. I know it's real."

Lan Wangji looked at him, evaluating his words. Wei Wuxian tried to find a way to explain what he felt.

"For a long time, I thought you hated me."

Lan Wangji made a small moue of discontent. "I never hated Wei Ying."

"Yeah, I know that *now* . But I didn't until really recently. Like, *REALLY* recently. My brain doesn't always… it's hard for me to believe people like me, most of the time."

Lan Wangji frowned. "I like Wei Ying. I love Wei Ying. Only Wei Ying."

Wei Wuxian's insides clenched at the words, wanting so desperately to believe them, but also so terrified that they might, somehow, still end up being untrue.

"I like Lan Zhan. Love Lan Zhan. Only Lan Zhan. But it's hard. Given how long I believed you hated me. I'm still… adjusting. But when you show me, when you can't hold back, then I know it's true. When you take, I don't have to worry about whether I am worthy enough to give."

Wei Wuxian let his hands slide inside the gap of Lan Wangji's robes, wrapping around to move along the hard, contoured planes of his back.

"When the pristine Second Jade of Lan loses his perfect self control and fucks me like he means it, fucks me like he can't do anything else, then I know it."

Lan Wangji considered this, then gave a slow nod. His hands slid up under Wei Wuxian's robes to settle firmly on his ass, his large palms moulding possessively to the curve. He closed his eyes, his throat working and his jaw clenched, as though the feel of it was nearly overwhelming him. One of the benefits of having strong cultivation that Wei Wuxian had never considered nor appreciated was having a remarkably short refractory period. He could feel Lan Wangji's dick, fully hard again already, pressing up against his stomach where their bodies were pressed together.

Wei Wuxian smirked at the feel of it. He leaned forward, brushing his lips over Lan Wangji's.

"And, if I remember from all the times I copied the rules, there are *also* rules about pleasing one's spouse and showing respect for their needs. Lan Zhan, this poor husband you are betrothed to is very needy. He needs to be shown his husband's regard for him."

Lan Wangji's hands tightened on Wei Wuxian's ass as his eyes darkened. He sat back, pulling Wei Wuxian with him so he ended up straddling Lan Wangji's hips.

"Mm. I will show Wei Ying every day." He lifted Wei Ying just enough so his cock was able to slide behind him, pressing interestingly against the thin fabric of the back of Wei Wuxian's

loosened trousers.

Wei Wuxian let out a soft sound, arching his back and rocking into the feel of Lan Wangji's hard dick pressing against him.

"And dual cultivation takes practice," Wei Wuxian said, slightly breathlessly. "We didn't do a good job of it just now. I wasn't controlling my qi at all. I was too overwhelmed with thinking about having Lan Zhan's dick so hard for me, feeling him fuck my mouth so well. It will take a lot of practice before this one is able to concentrate enough for proper dual cultivation. You always used to scold me on my lack of concentration, er-gege. Lan Laoshi will have to help this poor student improve."

Lan Wangji's golden eyes glittered dangerously in the sunlight as he gripped either side of the back of Wei Wuxian's pants and pulled, rending the seam so that his dick now moved directly against his skin beneath their robes.

"Lan *Zhan!* These robes are new!" Any pretense at Wei Wuxian being actually upset about the loss was spoiled by the delighted grin on his face and the hardness of his own dick pressing up against Lan Wangji's stomach.

"Hm. *Diligence is the root* ."

Lan Wangji slid one hand to the flat of Wei Wuxian's stomach, wiping up some of the residual cum and coating his fingers with it before pressing one inside Wei Wuxian.

"Ah, fuck! Mm. My Lan Zhan is so smart," Wei Wuxian gasped, half laughing and half moaning as he arched back, grinding down on Lan Wangji's finger. He could feel Lan Wangji's rock-hard length shifting against him in small thrusts in time with his finger. "Lan Zhan is so diligent about his studies. He must help his poor husband with his focus. I need so much practice, Lan Zhan."

"Mm," Lan Wangji agreed, adding another finger while his free hand kneaded one side of the full, rounded globe of Wei Wuxian's ass, which seemed to be his new favorite place to keep his hands. "Neglecting duties to one's spouse is forbidden."

There was a wealth of dark intent in Lan Wangji's words, and Wei Wuxian's toes curled in response to it. His dick was achingly hard, shifting against his inner robe with just enough friction to tease but not enough to satisfy. The tangle of his robes made it difficult for him to reach between them to wrap a hand around himself. Besides that would require removing his hands from the muscles of Lan Wangji's back and he absolutely did not want to do that.

"Lan Zhan, please, I want…." Wei Wuxian wasn't exactly sure what he wanted, but the arousal in his body was burning through him in a frantic, almost painful level.

He wanted Lan Wangji to touch his cock. He wanted something other than Lan Wangji's fingers inside him. He wanted to press their bodies so closely together that they would never be separate again.

Lan Wangji's eyes were blazing beneath their half-closed lids, reflecting the same desire Wei Wuxian was sure showed in his own. He slid his hands forward, splaying them over the broad planes of Lan Wangji's chest, circling his thumbs across the pebbled nipples he could feel beneath the loose white robes.

He wanted to see them. To taste them. He was about to push the robes off when a voice cut through the quiet air of the clearing, causing them both to freeze.

“Oh! I didn’t mean to… interrupt. Though it looks as though I am a bit late for that,” Nie Huaisang said cheerily, stepping into the edge of the clearing, fluttering his fan as though embarrassed by what he was seeing (though Wei Wuxian noticed the man’s eyes did not move away from them in the slightest, and there was no telltale blush on his cheeks). “I didn’t know you’d be here together. I mean, I had thought you might be, but I didn’t know.”

Lan Wangji’s hands were hidden beneath Wei Wuxian’s robes. With Wei Wuxian straddling his lap, the most Nie Huaisang would be able to tell was that Lan Wangji’s robes were loosened, but Wei Wuxian’s were still properly tied and the damage to his pants would not be visible from the outside. Nor was the fact that Lan Zhan’s pants were still pushed down around his thighs, and that his dick was currently pressed hard and leaking against the cleft of Wei Wuxian’s ass.

The scene they made would definitely not look innocent, but it also did not likely look as bad as it actually was. As long as neither of them moved. Of course, Lan Wangji chose that moment to press another finger inside of Wei Wuxian, causing him to arch and let out a choked-off gasp.

Everything Wei Wuxian had ever been told about the restraint and innocence of Hanguang Jun was a big fucking lie. Lan Wangji’s face had returned to its cold, mask-like state as soon as Nie Huaisang’s voice had intruded upon them. But Wei Wuxian could feel the lie of it in the racing pulse beneath his fingers, and the still-hard length pressed against him.

“Nie-xiong!” Wei Wuxian managed, trying to cover his reaction as though it were of surprise, not lust. “Did you need something? My betrothed and I were just admiring the lovely brook you have here.”

Lan Wangji flexed his fingers inside Wei Wuxian, and Wei Wuxian seriously considered drawing *Suibian.* Once his brain was able to function again. Nie Huaisang’s amused laughter floated over to them from behind his fan.

“Yes, I can see just how much you were enjoying it. I am very happy for the both of you. In terms of what I need, it appears I will need to be organizing a wedding.”

Lan Wangji’s fingers pressed deeper inside of Wei Wuxian at the words, and a jolt of Lan Wangji’s qi followed the movement, causing Wei Wuxian’s senses to momentarily white out from pleasure. As soon as he could manage it, he glared down at Lan Wangji, who was watching him with a perfectly serene expression.

How did the world not realize what an absolute menace the illustrious Second Jade of Lan was? Wei Wuxian retaliated by shifting his hips as though innocently adjusting his position to turn slightly to face Nie Huaisang, but in reality he moved back just enough that Lan Wangji’s cock was rubbing even more fully against the cleft of his ass. Lan Wangji’s lips parted on a soft hiss that was too soft for Nie Huaisang to hear.

Fortunately, Nie Huaisang didn’t seem to notice anything amiss.

“Of course, given we are still in the rebuilding phase, coming out of the war. And there are significant, uh, *political* complications in your courtship, not to mention the fact that we haven’t

begun looking for the most auspicious date to have the ceremony. It could take some time to organize a wedding. Several months at least, if not a year."

Before the dismay at the thought of *maybe a year* without being married could sink in, Lan Wangji's eyes narrowed, his attention finally shifting from Wei Wuxian to lock onto Nie Huaisang.

"No." Lan Wangji's tone was hard and implacable.

Relief filled Wei Wuxian when he realized he was not the only one who didn't want to wait. The fact that Lan Zhan was equally impatient was enough to calm him. As long as they would be able to find stolen moments like this, it would be worth it in the end. They could manage.

Lan Wangji seemed to disagree, though, based on the stubborn set of the man's jaw. Wei Wuxian laughed, using it to cover for his movement as he rocked his hips slightly, reminding Lan Wangji that they still had this, even if it would have to be infrequent with all the chaperones they had been inflicted with. Wei Wuxian was not above sneaking into his betrothed's room in the middle of the night, if needed.

"Ah, Lan Zhan. It's fine. It doesn't really matter when the ceremony happens. We're basically married anyway." He clenched around Lan Wangji's fingers, watching the man's pupils dilate.

Nie Huaisang's head tilted, as though Wei Wuxian's words had caught his attention.

"Hm. That's true. The Nie sect has a handfasting ritual that couples often use rather than going through the whole ordeal of a formal ceremony. Though, of course, we're much more lax about the whole sex and pleasure thing than the Lan are. We're more lax about pretty much everything compared to the Lan, now that I think about it."

Lan Wangji stilled beneath Wei Wuxian. "GusuLan also has handfasting. It is rarely used. But permissible."

Wei Wuxian looked between Nie Huaisang and Lan Wangji. He had never really thought about marriage customs, outside of what his Shijie would be needing for her own ceremony. Since she had her heart set on a Jin, there was never any question that her wedding would involve every ceremonial aspect known to the cultivation world. The idea of skipping all that for himself was incredibly appealing.

"So, we could just… get married? Like, today? Right now?"

Lan Wangji turned to look at Wei Wuxian, the answer clear in the hot, possessive gaze. He could feel Lan Wangji's hips flex up fractionally, instinctively at the thought of being married.

At the thought of fucking his husband .

Wei Wuxian suddenly *really* wanted Nie Huaisang to be somewhere else. They would do whatever the handfasting ritual was, as soon as humanly possible.

"Then why have we been bothering talking about anything else?" Wei Wuxian asked, suppressing a shiver as Lan Wangji's fingers began working inside him, the movement just barely concealed beneath Wei Wuxian's robes.

He could be married to Lan Zhan. No one would be able to make them stay apart. He could sleep with Lan Zhan every night. They could have their ‘everyday’ every day, and not even Jiang Cheng could object (though that would not stop him, but everyone would know it was just for show). A-Yuan could have another father, one who was not hated by half the cultivation world.

Wei Ying would belong to Lan Zhan and Lan Zhan would belong to him. What the fuck were they waiting for? They already had all the downside of their desire to be married in terms of the political fallout. Why not at least get the benefits of actually being married?

Nie Huaisang coughed, reminding them of his (now very unwanted) presence.

“Well. I will leave you two to… ah… discuss things.” He turned to leave, then stopped, looking over his shoulder as though just remembering something. “Oh, Wei-xiong! Da-ge said he put memorial tablets for your parents in the Nie ancestral hall, since you are now a member of our sect. Jiang Cheng had mentioned that Sect Leader Jiang had never done so while you were at Lotus Pier, and he wanted to make sure it was rectified here immediately. Lan Qiren has been sedated and the Lan escort will be bringing him back to Cloud Recesses tomorrow. The elders have returned to their quarters to rest until dinner, since they will be leaving early in the morning and have been sitting vigil with Lan Qiren since yesterday. In case you wanted to see him before he leaves.”

Lan Wangji’s face did something complicated at Nie Huaisang’s words that Wei Wuxian was not sure how to interpret.

“This one thanks Second Master Nie for his foresight.”

Nie Huaisang fluttered his fan at Lan Wangji’s formal words. “What? I have no idea what you’re talking about, Hanguang-Jun. I’m just passing along information. I’ll leave you two alone. Don’t get up on my account! But I can’t guarantee how long it will last, since other people are looking for you, under the mistaken impression that you require a chaperone.”

The suggestive amusement in his voice caused Wei Wuixan’s face to heat.

“Brother will leave with Uncle. We will take the evening meal with him as well as Sect Leader Jiang and Jiang guniang.” Lan Wangji’s words seemed heavily weighted, and Nie Huaisang straightened, considering them.

After a moment he gave a slight bow, a pleased smile appearing on his face before he covered it with his fan. “I will arrange it.”

He turned and left, the silence that descended doing nothing to disrupt Wei Wuixan’s racing thoughts. Nie Huaisang’s footfalls had faded into the distance before he spoke. He looked down at Lan Wangji, finding the man watching him closely.

“Lan Zhan. Is it true? We can just… be married?”

“Mm,” Lan Wangji replied, though he seemed almost hesitant. “Wei Ying would not mind not having a more formal ceremony?”

Wei Wuxian could have shouted in frustration. “Why would I possibly want to wait if I could have Lan Zhan as my husband today?”

“Wei Ying deserves to be properly wed,” Lan Wangji said stubbornly.

“What Wei Ying *deserves* is to be properly *fucked* by his *husband* .” Wei Wuxian was gratified to hear the sharp intake of breath from Lan Wangji, but he suddenly worried that maybe the Second Jade of Lan was the one who wanted a proper ceremony. He had said ‘no’ to Nie Huaisang’s statement of them waiting a year, but that didn’t mean he wanted to forego the wedding entirely. “But if Lan Zhan wants to have a proper ceremony, it’s fine. I don’t mind waiting. We can just -”

Before Wei Wuxian could finish his sentence, Lan Wangji had taken his clean hand and pulled his forehead ribbon from his head while his other hand gripped Wei Wuxian’s hip to keep him in place.

“No. No waiting. Have waited enough.”

He grabbed Wei Wuxian’s arm, pulling it up as he wrapped the ribbon several times around his wrist before pressing his own against it, using his teeth to encircle his own wrist, binding them together.

Wei Wuxian remembered how many times Lan Wangji had nearly taken his arm off for just touching the forehead ribbon. And now it was wrapped around his wrist, binding him to Lan Wangji.

“Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian breathed, his eyes wide as Lan Wangji turned his hand, threading their fingers together.

The Lan head ribbon was for family.

It was sacred.

And it was now wrapped around Wei Wuxian’s wrist.

Wei Wuxian squeezed Lan Wangji’s fingers firmly between his own. He wound his other hand into Lan Wangji’s hair and pulled him close, kissing him deeply. Lan Wangji’s hand gripped him back, their fingers twined tightly together as their tongues slid softly against each other.

The sects and the elders had no place in this moment. Their bond was between the two of them, tying them together as husbands, not pawns on a political board.

“Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian murmured against Lan Wangji’s lips, frustrated because he wanted to speak but also didn’t want to stop kissing him. “Love you. Want this. Want to be married to Lan Zhan.”

Lan Wangji shuddered beneath him, his hips thrusting up, reminding Wei Wuxian that they had unfinished business that they’d started before Nie Huaisang had interrupted them. (He was willing to forgive his friend because it had ended up with him getting married to Lan Wangji on the forest floor instead of however many months away an actual wedding would have taken.)

Lan Wangji thrust his fingers of his free hand back inside Wei Wuxian, moving them in time with his hips, watching every expression of pleasure that raced across Wei Wuxian’s face.

“Want you. Want you. Want you,” Wei Wuxian chanted, feeling increasingly dissatisfied with Lan Wangji’s fingers when he could feel his thick cock moving so close to where it needed to be.

Lan Wangji pulled his fingers out, causing Wei Wuxian to hiss in frustration, and reached between them, smearing the remaining cum from Wei Wuxian’s stomach and coated his dick with it.

He laid back on the grass, pulling their bound hands back to rest by his head, his palm facing up, with Wei Wuxian’s hand on top of his, pressing down into the earth. Wei Wuxian braced his other hand on Lan Wangji’s shoulder as he lifted his hips up. Keeping his eyes locked on Lan Wangji’s, he shifted back so he could feel the head of Lan Wangji’s cock pressing insistently where his fingers had been before. Lan Wangji’s free hand held it in position, but he didn’t thrust up, letting Wei Wuxian set the pace. It felt significantly bigger than three of Lan Wangji’s fingers, and Wei Wuxian hesitated.

“*Wei Ying* .”

Wei Wuxian wasn’t sure if it was a question or a plea, but it gave him the impetus he needed to move.

“Fuck, Lan Zhan. You’re bigger than you’re supposed to be for this,” Wei Wuxian gritted his teeth as he bore down.

Both of them gasped as Lan Wangji’s head breached Wei Ying, their joined hands gripping each other tightly. Wei Wuxian’s thighs were trembling, and Lan Wangji’s breath was coming in rapid, shallow pants as he fought to keep himself still, his free hand gripping Wei Wuxian’s hip in a bruising grip.

The feeling of being stretched was overwhelming, and somewhat painful, but the sheer fact that *Lan Wangjji was inside him* overrode anything else. He began to slowly sink down on Lan Wangji’s cock, feeling it pushing in, stretching him wide with an almost unbearable pressure. The books Nie Huaisang had shown him all those years ago did not prepare him for what it felt like. Lan Wangji closed his eyes, and suddenly Lan Wangji’s qi was pouring thick and strong into Wei Wuxian’s lower dantian.

“Oh, fuck. *Lan Zhan!”*

If he had thought he knew what it felt for Lan Zhan to be inside him before, it was nothing compared to how it felt now. The smooth, powerful feel of the spiritual essence of Lan Wangji shot straight through his meridians, pulsing into his core. He was fucking him just as completely with his qi as he was with his body. Wei Wuxian’s thighs lost their hold, and he slid down seated fully on Lan Wangji’s dick.

“Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji gritted out, the flow of his qi shivering but not relenting. Wei Wuxian opened up his own pathways, letting his own qi flow into Lan Wangji’s, sending it down through his center.

Lan Wangji’s golden eyes widened and went nearly black with how blown his pupils were. They had exchanged qi before, but it had never felt like this. There was a feedback loop of pleasure and power. It was better than anything Wei Wuxian had ever felt. He was so filled with the depth of connection to Lan Wangji that he thought nothing could ever be more than this.

Then Lan Wangji began to move, and Wei Wuxian's brain ceased to function. Every fibre of his being was focused on the feel of their bodies joined: their hands gripped tight, the pleasure-pain drag of Lan Wangji's cock moving deep inside him. Their qi flowed like a riptide back and forth between them, creating a resonance between their cores.

Wei Wuxian wasn't exactly sure what words were coming out of his mouth, except that Lan Zhan's name was making up the majority of them. Lan Wangji's hips were snapping up with a bruising force, the flow of spiritual energy building in waves between them until everything whited out and waves crashed. Wei Wuxian felt the hairs on the back of his arms stand on end as pleasure rippled through him, leaving his body shuddering in its wake as he collapsed forward on Lan Wangji's chest.

Wei Wuxian knew he was alive, because could feel the rise and fall of Lan Wangji's breaths, and heard the racing of Lan Wangji's heart begin to slow. He realized his eyes were closed, and slowly opened them. Lan Wangji was looking up at him, his entire expression open and soft and almost wondering.

They lay together on the soft grass as the evening light limned everything in gold around them. The soft sound of the water in the nearby brook centered them back on their current location.

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji murmured, taking their joined hands and brushing his fingertips along Wei Wuxian's temple before tracing along his cheekbone. He could feel Lan Wangji's softening inside him, the slick feel of his cum leaking out.

"I… am not sure I can move," Wei Wuxian managed, trying to get his brain connected back with his body again. His golden core was humming, filled with an energy that wasn't fully his own. Any doubts he had that dual cultivation could rapidly strengthen a cultivator's core were gone.

"Mm," Lan Wangji said, gently maneuvering them so they were side-by-side. "Our cores connected."

Wei Wuxian blinked, not entirely sure he knew exactly what that meant, but he definitely could feel it.

"If this is what dual cultivation is like, I don't understand why cultivators would ever do anything else."

Lan Wangji's lips curve into a tiny smile. "Discipline."

"Ugh. Yeah, fuck discipline, though. We are doing this again as soon as I can feel my legs."

Lan Wangji stirred. "People will come. First, we have to make our bows."

He sat up, pulling out of Wei Wuxian's body, much to Wei Wuxian's objections.

"Lan Zhaan! How can you be moving? You just ruthlessly fucked your poor husband on the ground. I need time to recover!"

"Mm. I will take responsibility."

Lan Wangji helped Wei Wuxian up, using their still-bound hands. For all of Lan Wangji's calm determination, Wei Wuxian could feel his hand trembling in his. They walked over to the river where they were able to wash up somewhat, though there was no salvaging Wei Wuxian's pants.

"I have new clothes for Wei Ying. Will bathe first."

They straightened themselves up as much as possible, though it wouldn't fool anyone who looked too closely, especially with their hands still bound. With the feel of Lan Wangji's qi pulsing through his body, none of that seemed particularly important. Wei Wuxian looked up at the darkening sky above them.

"Time for our first bow?"

Keeping his hand clasped in Lan Wangji's, they turned and bowed to the heavens. As the sky had already borne witness to their consummation, it didn't seem disrespectful to make their bows in less than pristine condition.

Their second bow would be done after their bath. Lan Wangji seemed unconcerned as he gently guided Wei Wuxian to begin walking back towards the keep.

Neither of them spoke as they walked and the few people they encountered were focused on their own business and didn't spare them a second look. Lan Wangji guided them to his own rooms, where there was no chance of accidentally running into A-Yuan before they had properly cleaned themselves up. There was a large basin of water, which Lan Wangji heated with a talisman. They cleaned their hands with Lan Wangji's sandalwood soap before untying their bound hands and removing their clothing. There was not time for a full bath, but they were able to clean each other well with the soft bathing cloth.

The act was oddly soothing, rather than sexual, despite both of them being unclothed. It spoke more of care-taking than lust, with both of them still feeling the other's spiritual energy moving through their meridians, humming in their cores. Wei Wuxian still felt the ache deep in his body, marking Lan Wangji's physical presence there as well. He liked the feel, liked the reminder of what they were to each other now.

When they were both clean and dried, the first thing Lan Wangji did was tie his forehead ribbon around Wei Wuxian's wrist, before even getting dressed. The first time it had been tied to him, the moment had been rushed, then overshadowed by their consummation as cultivation partners. This time, Lan Wangji took his time, carefully crossing the strands of the ribbon back and forth around Wei Wuxian's wrist before tying it off.

"You don't need it back?" Wei Wuxian asked, somewhat breathless at being in sole possession of something that signified so much to Lan Wangji.

"Everything I have is now Wei Ying's. Wei Ying is now the one who holds my restraint."

Wei Wuxian felt his throat grow tight at the earnest words. He pulled the red ribbon from his own hair. Lan Wangji was watching him silently. Wei Wuxian felt a little uncertain. Compared to what Lan Wangji had just given him, his own ribbon was nothing much. Still, it meant something to him.

“This isn’t sacred. Not like yours. But when I was a child, the only thing that I had left from my mother was a red ribbon. It wasn’t spiritually imbued the way yours is, so… eventually it fell apart. But I always look for one that looks the same. It’s… it’s not much compared you yours, but -”

“Put it on,” Lan Wangji said, interrupting him. He lifted his arm, holding it out.

Wei Wuxian looked at it for a moment, then gave a shaky nod and began winding the ribbon around Lan Wangji’s wrist, following the same pattern as the white ribbon that adorned his own wrist.

The bright red against Lan Wangji’s pale skin reminded Wei Wuxian of all the tales he’d heard about the red thread of destiny. Their paths were tied together now, just as their bodies and cores were.

When he finished tying off the knot, Lan Wangji laid his hand on top of Wei Wuxian’s before he could release the ribbon. The air stilled between them as they stood together in the quiet room, naked except for the ribbons they wore on their wrists.

Lan Wangji twined their fingers together, drawing Wei Wuxian in and kissing him slowly. Their mouths moved against each other languidly, gradually deepening. Lan Wangji’s hand slid down Wei Wuxian’s lower back, then further down, gripping the curve of his backside.

Wei Wuxian’ smiled into the kiss. “Do you like my ass, Lan Zhan?”

“Mm,” Lan Wangji agreed, pressing their bodies close enough together that Wei Wuxian was able to feel just exactly how much Lan Wangji did, in fact, like his ass. “I will show Wei Ying later how much. We should dress now.”

Wei Wuxian allowed Lan Wangji to step back, even if part of it was to selfishly be able to see how beautiful his husband looked, naked and fully aroused. Wei Wuxian felt a dark thrill that this sight was now his. He could look upon his husband’s body whenever he wanted, just as Lan Wangji could look upon him.

Lan Wangji reached into a pouch that was resting on the table and pulled out a set of dark green silk robes, and a red silk under-robe. Wei Wuxian felt a flash of guilt that he had nothing to give Lan Wangji in return.

“Lan Zhan. You didn’t need to buy these. They’re too nice for someone like me.”

Lan Wangji placed the robes in Wei Wuxian’s hands.

“Will Wei Ying wear the robes I bought him?” Lan Wangji asked, and something in his tone signaled to Wei Wuxian that there was more at issue than just replacing the robes they had just ruined.

Wei Wuxian looked down at the beautiful robes Lan Wangji handed him. He was suddenly reminded of other robes Lan Wangji had purchased for him. After the battle with the *Xiangliu* , and again, after the Burial Mounds. At the time, he hadn’t thought much about it. Believing that Lan Wangji barely tolerated him, the gift of the robes seemed more an act of kindness or charity.

But now that he knew better, knew that Lan Wangji had liked him for a long time, the gift of the robes might have meant something else.

“Lan Zhan. When you gave me those robes, after the *Xiangliu* ….,” Wei Wuxian paused to look at Lan Wangji.

Lan Wangji was looking carefully at a spot over Wei Wuxian’s right shoulder, his ears pinkening.

“Lan Zhan, were those robes a *courting gift* ?”

Lan Wangji did not turn to meet his gaze.

“Oh, my god. I am such a fucking idiot. Lan *Zhan* . I didn’t know. I thought you were just -,” Wei Wuxian cut himself off. “Nevermind. It doesn’t matter what I thought.”

“Wei Ying was not ready to be courted at the time. And I was not… skilled.”

“No! Lan Zhan, no. *Baobei* , I would have accepted your robes so fucking hard if I’d known what they meant. I just never thought you would be interested in me, that way. I will only wear robes Lan Zhan gives me from now on.”

“Mm,” Lan Wangji replied, sounding deeply pleased at the idea. “Wei Ying does not need Nie Huaisang’s robes.”

Wei Wuxian smiled, drawing Lan Wangji down into another kiss. “No. I will wear the beautiful robes my husband gave me. Help me put them on.”

Lan Wangji was incredibly pleased to do so.

They made their way through the halls of the Nie keep. Wei Wuxian realized they were heading to the ancestral hall as they walked past the wing where the Lan delegation was staying. He slowed, tugging on Lan Wangji’s sleeve.

“We should go see Lan Qiren. I know it’s not the same as having your parents’ tablets here, but he’s at least one of your elders.”

Lan Wangji looked at him for a moment, then inclined his head, turning down the corridor that Wei Wuxian had indicated. They reached the door to Lan Qiren’s room, and Lan Wangji entered first. There was a Nie physician in attendance, preparing medicine near the brazier, but none of the Lan elders, just as Nie Huaisang had promised.

Guilt flared in Wei Wuixan as he saw the pallor of the old man sleeping on the bed.

“Not Wei Ying’s fault,” Lan Wangji said as he approached his uncle.

He knelt down by his bedside, placing his fingers at his uncle’s wrist to check his qi.

“Still disrupted,” Lan Wangji said, looking over at the medical cultivator.

She nodded. “That’s why we’re keeping him sedated. It’s almost time for his next dose of the sedative, but I can give you a few moments of privacy with him, if you’d like.”

Lan Wangji nodded, and the woman left. Wei Wuxian knelt beside him on the floor.

He bowed low to Lan Qiren. “This one is sorry for your distress, and thanks you for lifting the banishment.”

Lan Qiren’s fingers twitched. Wei Wuxian looked over to Lan Wangji, who seemed equally surprised.

Lan Qiren’s eyes opened, and he looked at Wei Wuxian. His gaze was unsettled, not entirely focused, so different from the stern teacher Wei Wuxian was used to.

“Do not apologize.” He seemed to want to say something more, but was unable to. He looked at Lan Wangji, his eyes widening as he noticed the lack of forehead ribbon.

Wei Wuxian wasn’t sure if it was the right thing to do or not, but he lifted his wrist, allowing the man to see where it was bound. Lan Qiren relaxed back, his eyes drifting closed.

“Good,” was all he said before he was once again asleep.

Lan Wangji drew a slow breath, then bowed deeply to his uncle. Wei Wuxian bowed beside him. There didn’t need to be more words to make a clear blessing when it was offered.

They went next to the Nie ancestral hall. Wei Wuxian was already feeling somewhat overwhelmed by the day, and needed to take a steadying breath before opening the door. There were rows of tablets lined along shelves. Some had incense burning, others small offerings beside them. It took them a moment to find the tablets that bore the names of Wei Wuxian’s parents. Someone had already lit incense for them, and Wei Wuxian promised himself he would bring proper offerings for them as soon as possible.

He knelt in front of their tablets, Lan Wangji kneeling beside him.

“Ma. Baba,” Wei Wuxian said, bowing low, not having had the chance to speak to his parents tablets before, and not remembering how he had addressed them in life. The mere mention of his mother’s existence had been a guaranteed way to enrage Madam Yu. Having a tablet had been unthinkable. Still, it didn’t excuse his lapse as their son.

“This one is sorry he has not been able to make proper offerings to you. I promise to be more filial.”

Lan Wangji laid a hand on Wei Wuxian’s arm, steadying him.

“I want you to meet my husband. Lan Zhan, courtesy name Wangji, the Second Jade of Lan, Hanguang-Jun. He is amazing. He is so good, Ma. I wish you could have met him. We have a son, A-Yuan. He is… you would love him so much. You would love both of them.”

Wei Wuxian drew a wet, shivering breath, unable to say more.

Lan Wangji bowed deeply beside him.

“This one is grateful to you for your son, and promises to look after him and care for him.”

There was so much more that Wei Wuxian wanted to say to them, so much more he wanted to tell them, but his throat was too closed to allow any of the words to come out. He bowed again, touching his head once again to the floor. He had a place now where he could come and speak with them. It didn’t all have to be said right then.

Lan Wangji led him to the courtyard behind the kitchens, where A-Yuan was playing with his friend. The evening air had set in, a cool breeze blowing against their skin. Wei Wuxian felt himself settle at the sight of his son, laughing brightly as he and the other child ran around with sticks in some sort of complicated game.

Lan Wangji’s presence was solid and calm beside him.

Voices from the kitchens drifted out into the courtyard. The servants were being sent to prepare the rooms for dinner as the food was almost finished. If Nie Huaisang had managed to set up a private dinner for them with Lan Xichen and the Jiang siblings, they would have the meal to announce their marriage.

Wei Wuxian wondered what their reaction would be. Surprise, possibly, at the fact that the very traditional Lan Wangji had decided to move so quickly. But they all seemed supportive of the wedding overall, so he was not expecting any argument. They would all three be in different sects now, with Jiang Yanli marrying into the Jin, him joining the Nie. Wei Wuxian allowed himself a moment of wistfulness that the two he had grown up with as siblings had not been involved in the ceremony, and wondered if Lan Wangji felt the same about his own brother’s absence.

He wouldn’t have traded it for months of waiting, and Wei Wuxian had long ago stopped yearning for things to be perfect. His marriage to Lan Wangji had been more than anything he could ever hoped for. Separate from all the politics and Madam Yu’s and Lan elders with their disapproval.

They called A-Yuan over, and set out to find the room that Nie Huaisang had allowed for them to use as a family dinner before Lan Xichen returned to his sect.

Lan Xichen and the Jiang siblings were already seated when they arrived, having been somewhat delayed by taking A-Yuan to wash up before dinner. The tables were set with tea cups at each seat, and a beautiful teapot was in the center of the table. There were a few bowls of snacks set out. Some dried red dates, whole lotus seeds, and dried whole longan fruit. Wei Wuxian idly wondered how they got them this far north.

A-Yuan raced forward, excited to see what foods were already laid out. Jiang Yanli’s expression was somewhat strange as she told him about them. Lan Xichen looked up as they entered, his ever-present smile freezing on his face as he saw Lan Wangji without his headband. Lan Wangji reached down, sliding his hand into Wei Wuxian’s where his ribbon was bound. Lan Xichen clocked the movement, looking back up to Lan Wangji for confirmation.

Before either of them could speak, a servant moved forward to pour the tea, but a movement from Lan Wangji stopped him.

Lan Wangji picked up the teapot, and turned to where Jiang Yanli and Jiang Cheng were seated.

He walked over to them, and knelt beside the table.

Wei Wuxian felt his entire being freeze.

“Wangji?” Lan Xichen asked.

Wei Wuxian was not sure what expression was on Lan Xichen’s face, because he could not take his eyes from Lan Wangji

With perfect elegance, Lan Wangji poured tea into Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli’s cups as they both stared first at him, then at Wei Wuxian.

“Please accept my tea,” Lan Wangji said.

Holy shit. This was happening. And Lan Wangji was taking the role as the bride. What the actual fuck?

As expected Jiang Yanli recovered first, taking the cup and drinking from it. She set her cup carefully down, and smiled at Lan Wangji.

“I am so happy for you both.”

Jiang Cheng was gaping, and Jiang Yanli turned to give him a sharp glance.

He picked up his cup, and drank from it.

“Yeah. I guess. But you’re having a ceremony later. Neither of you is even wearing red! What the fuck?! No brother of mine is going to get away with being married on the cheap.”

It wasn’t really a full tea ceremony. Not really. Maybe they would have a proper one later. But it was enough. Wei Wuxian was grinning but his hands were also shaking as he walked over and knelt next to where Lan Xichen was seated.

His movements might not have been as beautifully smooth as Lan Wangji’s, but he poured the tea and was able to properly hand it to Zewu-Jun without spilling it.

“Zewu-Jun. Please accept my tea.”

Lan Xichen looked at the cup for a moment, then took it, carefully drinking from it before setting the cup back down.

“It seems as though we are past such formalities. You should call me Xichen-ge. I am happy for you both.”

Lan Wangji had risen and walked over to kneel beside Wei Wuxian. He bowed low to his brother.

“Brother. This one thanks you for your blessing.”

“Wangji,” Lan Xichen’s voice wavered, and the man had to visibly gather himself. “I am sorry that I could not give you a proper ceremony. It will happen. I will work on the elders. Uncle will as well. But no matter what you have my blessing. Both of you do.”

The Twin Jades of Lan held each other’s gaze, communicating silently for a moment. Then Lan Wangji gave a small smile. “Thank you, Brother.”

“Do I get tea, too?” Wen Yuan asked, causing everyone in the room to laugh.

“I will pour you some, you gremlin,” Wei Wuxian said, taking a cup and pouring a small amount for the child, who sipped it happily.

“I accept your tea, Baba!”

The doors opened, and servants began bringing in food. The meal was not set up as a wedding banquet. There was no red in the decorations, and the food was standard fare. Somehow, Nie Huaisang and Meng Yao had managed to walk the line of letting their siblings feel included in the hand fasting, but not presuming to take the place of a full wedding ceremony.

Jiang Cheng and Lan Xichen were both leaving in the morning to return to their own sects. The priority for both had to be rebuilding their sects, and securing the peace. There would need to be a formal ceremony, eventually, for political reasons if nothing else.

But for now, they were married, and had the blessings of their families. Everything else could wait.

In the end, it was perfect after all.

The end.

A/N - I will be posting a few key scenes from LWJ's pov, as well as probably a few timestamp oneshots, so if you like the universe, best bet is to subscribed to the series rather than the individual story. I will also be posting other shorter (<50k words hopefully) wangxian stories including a huli jing wwx/dragonJi AU, modern AUs and other canon AUs. Thank you for reading!!

Notes on marriage stuff: The hand fasting described here is loosely based on the Untamed cold pond cave, but also other handfasting rituals (the keeping the hands bound while fucking thing), which I liked. As for the tea ceremony, I intentionally didn’t have it fully follow the modern tea ceremony, because that is more recent (by recent I mean like Tang Dynasty, so not realy RECENT, but canon time period is older) but the ritual of tea broadly seemed old enough to fit in some form. The foods are also an older tradition where the important thing was not to have cut/broken foods served at weddings. The ones I chose for this story are just the ones I know from more modern times, but they are at least native to China so they might have been common even however many thousand years ago this story takes place in. And - if not - *waves hands at flying swords* this is just for fun anyway!

Chapter End Notes

Content warning: exhibitionism, cum as lube, dirty talk, slight voyeurism, unintentional(ish?) choking (during oral sex), qi fucking.

Works inspired by this one

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